

THE JAMES BOYS WEEKLY.

Containing Stories of Adventure.

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NEW YORK, MAY 8, 1903.

Price 5 Cents.

THE JAMES BOYS AND THE RED LEGS,

OR,

THE GREAT KANSAS RAID.

BY D.W. STEVENS.



"Heavens! It's the Harwood boy!" gasped Jesse. But his hands went up. So did Frank's. So did Quantrell's. "That's the talk!" chuckled the intruder; "gentleman, I rather think I've got the drop on you."

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CHAPTER I.

THE NIGHT DASH OUT OF KICKAPOO.

"Will! Oh, Will!"

"Coming, sir! Coming!"

"Come, quick! Come now! Never mind getting out the new saddles! We shan't want them—but I want you now."

Young Will Harwood dropped the hammer and cold chisel, and abandoning his work of opening the case which contained the new saddles, hurried up the cellar stairs.

He found Mr. Simon Pierce, his employer, pacing up and down the store in anything but a pleasant frame of mind.

"They are coming, Will!" he exclaimed. "They are down onto us at last!"

"Who's coming? What do you mean, sir?" gasped Will, alarmed at the agitation of Mr. Pierce, who was the proprietor of the principal store in the town of Kickapoo, Eastern Kansas, and a man well known all over that much-troubled region for his honesty and kindness of heart.

"Who is coming? Why, the guerrillas, to be sure," was the reply of the merchant. "Who else is there, Will Harwood, that we all live in fear of these days?"

"Very true, sir. I might have known, but are you sure the guerrillas are coming? You know we have thought so once or twice before and found ourselves mistaken, and it may be the same now."

"No, it ain't, Will! No, it ain't!" cried Mr. Pierce. "It's a dead sure thing, this time, boy. If you don't believe it look here!"

He flung open the store door.

Will followed him out upon the street, his eye roaming over the prairie in the direction of Mr. Pierce's pointing finger.

"There you have it, boy! If them ain't the guerrillas, then I'm a ghost."

"What's the matter with their being the Red Legs, Mr. Pierce?"

"The Red Legs are west of us. Last I knew Gen. Jim Lane was at Escotah."

"And these are coming from the river?"

"Exactly."

"I'm afraid you are right. I'm afraid they are the guerrillas."

"Run in and get the glass, boy! You'll find it in my desk. Ah, Neighbor Brownson, we are in for it at last, it seems."

This to the butcher who came hurrying out of the shop next door.

"Do you think so?" he gasped. "Do you really think so, Mr. Pierce?"

"I do. I haven't a doubt of it."

"Then in heaven's name what's to be done?"

"First of all, to be sure; then, if the worst is to happen, to dispose of the women and children as best we can."

"Great heavens! But how? Where? If it really is Quantrell and his cutthroats there is little hope of saving our loved ones, Mr. Pierce, whatever course we may take."

"We'll be sure in a minute," said the merchant coolly, as Will came running out with the glass.

He focused it upon the approaching horsemen, who could now be distinctly seen.

"Neighbor Brownson, ring the alarm bell!" he cried. "Lose not a second! Quantrell is upon us! I see the black flag!"

Ding—dong!

Ding—dong!

Ding—dong!

Five minutes later the bell in the Methodist Church steeple rang out the dread warning which the good people of Kickapoo had expected now these many weeks.

For weeks past rumor had been rife, and it was very generally believed that the guerrillas contemplated another raid.

Had the time come?

The Kickapoo people thought so when the bell tolled in the twilight that evening.

Simon Pierce had not a doubt of it, for the storekeeper was a Missourian of well-known Union sentiments.

He knew his own people, too, and hoped for nothing.

But Simon Pierce had neither wife nor children to fear for, and while the women and children were being hurried to the church, and their fathers and brothers prepared to defend them, the merchant turned his attention to the bank, of which he was cashier.

Hurrying inside, Mr. Pierce hastily opened the safe, and gathered up the money and securities.

All told, they amounted only to a trifle more than ten thousand dollars.

By Mr. Pierce's orders Will emptied out two sacks of flour, and into these bags the money was hastily tumbled.

"What do you propose to do with it, sir?" Will inquired, for as yet Mr. Pierce had not disclosed his plans.

"There is but one thing to do, Will."

"And that is?"

"For us to ride to Escotah and take refuge in the Red Legs' camp."

"But can we make it?"

"We must make it. Go saddle the horses, boy! You will find me ready on your return."

Will rushed around to the stable.

There was no time to be lost.

The whole village was now up in arms, and the excitement was intense.

Will hastily saddled the two best horses in Mr. Pierce's stable and brought them around to the store door.

His employer was there waiting for him, surrounded by a knot of armed men, to whom he had been relating his plans.

"It's the best thing you can do, I suppose," said the butcher, "and in the darkness you may escape."

"I'm not looking for the worst, neighbor," replied Mr. Pierce. "I expect to escape them and reach General Lane's camp in safety. But if any man here thinks that I am leaving town for any other reason than to protect this money, let him speak now, and I remain with you and fight it out."

Cries of "No, no! We know you! We trust you!" were heard on every side.

"Then I'm off," exclaimed Mr. Pierce, leaping into the saddle. Come, Will! Follow me!"

"Beware of outriders," shouted the butcher, as they galloped down the street.

In a moment they were upon the open prairie, with the lights of Kickapoo behind them.

On they dashed at breakneck speed, their eyes striving to pierce the darkness.

"It's a terrible thing, Mr. Pierce."

"Terrible, indeed, Will, but then war is always terrible."

"Do you think they will burn the town?"

"That's what they are out for."

"Then my mind is made up."

"To what?"

"To join the Red Legs."

"It is the one thing to do for every able-bodied young fellow who loves his country."

"Hark! What's that?" breathed Will, suddenly.

"Some one coming directly for us," whispered Mr. Pierce.

For the form of a mounted man had suddenly appeared in front of them.

He was dashing toward them over the prairie, and the footfalls of his horse were absolutely noiseless.

There was no chance to escape unseen.

A shout from the solitary rider told them that already they had been discovered.

"One of the outriders!" gasped Will. "What's to be done?"

"Stand our ground. He is only one, and I am not so sure that he is a guerrilla after all."

"But why? He must be."

"His horse's hoofs are muffled. The guerrillas don't ride so, but it is an old trick of Jim Lane's."

"Wait! Here he is—we shall soon know."

And, indeed, there was no time for further talk, for the solitary rider was already upon them.

"Halt!" he shouted. "Who goes there?"

Mr. Pierce and Will reined in.

Unslinging their rifles, they held them ready as the man came dashing up.

"We are friends—don't shoot!" called the banker.

"Friends to which cause?"

"The right one, brother!"

"Ah! You are not guerrillas!" exclaimed the man, halting before them.

"No, thank God! We are honest men."

"A scarce article in these days."

"You are one of Lane's command?"

"Yes. I took you for outriders of Quantrell's gang."

"And well you might. Possibly you know that Quantrell is bearing down on Kickapoo even now?"

"Yes, it is known. Are you from Kickapoo?"

"Yes."

"The town is doomed, unless Lane can be communicated with."

"Is not Lane at Escotah?"

"No. He left there early this afternoon, and moved down to the river; he had warning that Quantrell meant to cross."

"And you are bound for his camp?"

"Yes. I am one of the scouts thrown out to watch for the coming of the enemy. I spied them just at sundown, and am on my way for the camp."

"Then go, and God be with you!" cried the banker; "but you are too late to save Kickapoo, I fear."

"It may not be too late," said the man, "for others may have seen the guerrillas before I did. You hear them, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"I'm off! Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

Away dashed the Red Leg.

But Mr. Pierce did not move.

"It's of no use for us to go to Escotah now," he said drearily.

"We had better go with the Red Leg," ventured Will.

"No, not if Lane is on the move."

"But the money?"

"Will not be safe in Escotah now. With Lane on the other side of us we cannot tell what may come to pass."

"You fear that the guerrillas may attack Escotah?"

"Yes, if they are driven from Kickapoo, or even if they burn the town they may make their retreat this way."

"Would it not be best for us to join the Red Legs, then?"

"No, not while they are on the move, I say. Our first care must be for the money. Will, I have made up my mind. We will bury the money here and return to take our part in the fight."

"It would suit me exactly. I'm dying to get at those scoundrels, but is it safe?"

"And why not?"

"Could we ever find the spot again?"

"Perhaps not, if we were to choose a place right here on the open prairie, but I don't mean to do that."

"And what then?"

"Why, the creek can't be far away; we can choose a place among the cottonwoods."

"The creek is on our right."

"Correct. I see you are wide awake. This way, boy; we'll put our plan into action at once."

They turned and pushed forward through the darkness.

"Hello!" said Mr. Pierce suddenly, "here we are at the creek sooner than I thought."

A line of trees had suddenly risen before them.

It was the fringe of cottonwoods which skirted the creek, and here the riders paused.

They listened carefully, but could hear no sound.

"I reckon we are alone, fast enough," said Mr. Pierce, "so we might as well get to work at once."

They dismounted, and tying their horses, picked out a suitable place at the foot of one of the largest cottonwoods, which would be easily recognized.

Two sharp sticks, cut from the tree, served them well enough for spades.

With these they soon scooped out a shallow hole, and the flour sacks were tumbled in.

"Cover 'em up, boy! Cover 'em up!" whispered the banker. "Thank heaven we have the money safe at last!"

Crack!

Crack!

Suddenly two rifle shots rang out.

"Oh, my God! I'm a dead man!" gasped the banker, and he fell forward over the hole.

Horried beyond all telling, Will sprang forward to his assistance.

But he missed his footing.

His toe caught in a projecting root and he fell, rolled down the slope and tumbled into the creek with a loud splash, just as two dark forms came rushing through the cottonwoods, rifles in hand.

CHAPTER II.

WILL HARWOOD'S WILD RACE.

"By gosh, Frank! We've done 'em both."

"Reckon we have, Jess. Here's one—but where's t'other?"

"Tumbled into the creek; didn't you hear?"

"I heard a splash; but I don't take nothing for granted."

"We'll soon know! Whistle up the boys!"

A sharp whistle now sounded.

Jesse James, the future bandit king, destined in after years to become the terror of Missouri, had given the signal for his friends.

Immediately there was a rush, and three mounted men, leading two spare horses, came dashing up.

These were three of the wildest spirits among Quantrell's guerrillas—the notorious Younger brothers, in fact—Cole, Jim and Bob.

With the James Boys, Jesse and Frank, they had been doing duty as outriders.

"What's up, Jesse?" called Cole, as the brothers flung themselves from the saddle. "We heard your rifles speak."

"I don't know as there's anything up, but there's a man down here," replied Jesse, bending over the body of Mr. Pierce.

"You've shot him?"

"Yes. Your lantern, Cole."

"Here it is, Jess."

"There was another. He fell into the creek. Look out for him—he must not escape."

The Youngers charged themselves with this duty while Jesse and Frank bent over the fallen man.

For, though nothing but a boy in years, already Jesse James had made himself felt as a leader among the guerrillas.

Quantrell trusted him implicitly.

As for the men, as a rule, they tacitly acknowledged his authority, as in this case.

"He's dead, that's sure," said Frank; "but look here, Jess—what in thunder is in them bags?"

"Just what I'm going to find out," said Jesse. "Roll him over, Frank. Money, by thunder! They are stuffed full!"

"No!"

"Yes. See for yourself."

"By gracious, we've made a haul! I tell you what it is, Frank; in my opinion, Quantrell won't find much cash left in the Kickapoo Bank."

"You think this money came from there, then?"

"I'm dead sure of it. Where else would it come from?"

"That's so."

Just then Cole came up, and he was informed of the find, and he exclaimed:

"We've made a big haul, Jesse. Must Quantrell know this?"

"Must he? Why, of course he must."

Cole gave a dissenting growl.

The fact was, the sight of so much money had rather turned his head.

"We five could start a little guerrilla band of our own with all that rhino to back us," he suggested.

"What! Would you turn traitor to Quantrell?" demanded Frank.

"'Tain't to be thought of," said Jesse, decidedly.

"That's right," said Frank. "There must be no polyfoxing; better tie them bags on to the horses and git!"

To this Bob and Jim Younger added their voices.

"All right; since you're all against me, I yield," said Cole. "But we can soon tell whether Quantrell has reached Kickapoo or not."

"Of course," said Frank. "We'll have light enough when he does."

"That's what's the matter. I'll go up and take a look."

Thus saying Cole hurried up the bank, and passing through the cottonwoods went out upon the open prairie, where in daylight a view of the doomed town could be had.

Here the horses of the outlaws had been left.

The horses ridden by Mr. Pierce and Will Harwood, which were picketed a little further up the creek, had not yet been discovered by the guerrillas.

Jesse James picked up the bags and followed, as did the others.

"By thunder, the town's a-blazing!" cried Cole, who was a little ahead.

"Let her burn!" cried Jesse. "By Godfrey, I only wish I was there to see the blamed Union shriekers squirm."

"Come, come! We must hurry up," said Frank. "Fasten on them bags, Jess, and let's be off."

"All right. Just what I'm going to do, but how about the fellow who tumbled into the creek? Are we going to drop him without further search?"

"Of course we are," said Cole. "He's drowned fast enough. What in thunder is the use of wasting any more time on him."

But right there Cole Younger was badly mistaken.

Will Harwood was not drowned.

Far from it.

At that very moment Will was within a stone's throw of the outlaws, listening to every word they said.

Crouching among the tall grass, where he had crawled up out of the water. Will lay motionless, his heart beating wildly, his soul filled with a thousand fears.

Twice those who searched had been within an inch of stepping on the boy.

But fortune favored him, and now that the danger seemed to have passed, Will's first thought was of Mr. Pierce.

Was he really dead?

The brave boy determined to know.

At the risk of being discovered, he crawled over to where the body of his employer still lay.

There could be no doubt that Mr. Pierce was dead.

A glance told the story.

The ball had entered his back, and he lay in a pool of blood.

It was with a sickening sensation that Will crawled away.

He drew the revolver Mr. Pierce had given him when they left Kickapoo.

He intended to use it.

"I'll shoot one of them if it costs me my life," he murmured, filled with the idea of revenge.

But in a moment he had changed his mind.

For just then one of the horses whinnied.

The sound was immediately answered by Will's horse from his place of concealment among the cottonwoods.

"By thunder, what's that?" exclaimed Jesse, who had just finished tying the bags to the saddle.

"Well, it's a horse, if I know anything," Cole Younger growled.

"Yes, but——"

"Pshaw! Them two had horses. Didn't we see them ride in here? I was just going to propose that we look for them. We'll do it now—come on!"

Forgetting the money for the moment, all hands followed Cole in the direction of the horses.

Will's heart beat wildly.

"Now's my time," he thought. "To kill one of those scoundrels would amount to nothing, but if I can save the money and carry out poor Mr. Pierce's last wish, it will be a big thing."

He rose to his feet and stealthily crept toward the horses of the outlaws.

They were not tied.

They were too well trained to need any such precaution.

Without an instant's hesitation, Will Harwood leaped upon Jesse's horse, and digging his heels into the animal's flanks went dashing across the prairie with the speed of the wind.

"What in thunder is that?" cried Jesse, his sharp ears catching the sound.

Back they rushed without having reached the other horses.

A cry of rage rang out.

"By Godfrey, it's the other fellow! He's off with the money!" Jesse bawled. "Get one of them horses, Frank—follow me!"

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Flinging himself upon his brother's horse, Jesse fired three shots as he dashed in hot pursuit.

It was powder wasted.

Already Will had a good hundred yards' start.

On he flew over the prairie.

On, and still on, never stopping to consider in what direction he was going.

Once more fortune was in his favor, for he had Jesse James' horse, and there was none better left behind.

CHAPTER III.

THE OLD REBEL OF THE LONELY RANCH.

"Quick! Let me in! They are after me! For God's sake, open the door!"

"Gosh-a-mighty! Another one!" came the answer from within the lonely ranch. "You go way! I'm an old rebel, I am. There hain't no shelter for Union shriekers hyar."

At the sound of these words Will Harwood's heart failed him, as well it might.

Will was hard pressed now.

For more than half an hour the boy kept up his mad dash over the prairie.

At first he gained a little.

Then he was just holding his own and no more.

But now all was changed, for the horse had stumbled and badly strained his off fore leg.

From that moment the outlaws, still in hot pursuit behind him, began to gain rapidly.

Will saw his danger.

The injured horse could go no further, and the outlaws were close upon him when Will dropped from the saddle and began thundering on the door.

"You must open. You shall help me," the boy shouted. "Do you want to see me murdered by the guerrillas, Bill Pride?"

"Who are you that knows me?"

"I am Will Harwood, you know—Mr. Pierce's clerk. For heaven's sake, open the door, quick."

"Well, gosh blame it all, if ye're a neighbor I s'pose I've got ter help yer," was the growling response.

Then the door was thrown open.

"Law gee! How many of 'em be there?" grumbled the rancher, looking out at the guerrillas, who were dashing toward the hut.

Without answering, Will hastily cut loose the bags and sprang into the room.

"Shut the door! Shut it, quick!"

The old man obeyed, putting up a heavy wooden bar against the door after it was closed.

"What 'tis you," he growled. "What's wrong down at Kickapoo, young man?"

"What's wrong? Why, Quantrell's guerrillas have burned the town, that's all."

"Well, that's enough, b'gosh! Where's Mr. Pierce?"

"Dead!"

"Sho'!"

"Shot by the guerrillas while we were attempting to escape."

"With the bank money?"

"Ask me no questions. Hide me somewhere or those men will murder me!"

"And them bags? I reckon I can see through a brick when there's a hole in it, young man."

"Have mercy!" pleaded Will. "I know the guerrillas are of your way of thinking, but remember what you owe to humanity. Think of your neighbors in Kickapoo. Their homes are gone. Many of them have had their wives and children murdered. Help me save what rightfully belongs to them, and God will bless you for the deed."

The old rancher chuckled.

"Young man, what do you take me for?" he said slowly. "Do you thing I'm a gosh-blamed barbarian? Now, come——"

"But you always said——"

"That I was an old rebel?"

"Yes."

"And so I am, but this here hain't warfare—this is highway robbery—it's murder—it's wuss!"

"And you will help me?"

"Help you? Yes, I will do what I can, and that may be more than you think. Get in there and leave me to deal with Quantrell's men."

He opened the door of a narrow closet alongside the big open fireplace, and thrust Will Harwood inside.

None too quick was the door closed.

For at the same instant Jesse James, followed by the rest of his party, came dashing into the yard.

"Here's the horse, boys! He's in here!" he shouted. "By Godfrey, we've treed him at last."

He sprang from the saddle, and with the butt of his revolver began beating on the door.

It was instantly opened.

The rancher stood before them calmly smoking a corn-cob pipe, and looking entirely unconcerned.

"Howdy, gentlemen! What can I do for ye?"

He asked this with a coolness which took Jesse somewhat aback.

"We want that fellow who just came in here," growled the young guerrilla.

"What feller?"

"Don't attempt to trifle with us, old man. You know."

"Know what?"

"Do you know who we are?"

"No, I'm blamed if I do."

"We are in Col. Quantrell's command."

"Sho! You don't say so!"

"Yes."

"Gosh! I thought from your half-starved look and the slab-sided look of your horses that you must be Red Legs."

There was a general laugh at this.

But Jesse did not join it.

He was not yet quite sure that the old ranchman was not making all this talk for the purpose of gaining time.

"Say, boys, enough of this!" he exclaimed. "Let's get down to the point."

"Waal, what is the point?"

"Where's the fellow who came here on that horse?" shouted Jesse.

"I don't know!" roared old Bill.

"You lie!"

"Who says so?"

"I say so."

"Then you lie, gosh blame yer! You lie when you say you belong to Quantrell's guerrillas, for they wouldn't threaten an old rebel—specially a man like me who can put Quantrell onto a blame big thing."

"Let up, Jesse," said Frank, catching these last words. "You'll never get nothing out of the old feller that way."

"Never in the world," added Cole. "It's my opinion he's straight."

"I guess that's straight, Jess," said Frank. "I reckon our friend here is honest in what he says. Probably the fellow has given us the slip."

"Don't be too sure," growled Jesse.

"Of course we can't take anything for granted. We shall have to make a thorough search."

"And I'll show you all there is to be seen," chuckled the rancher. "This way, gentlemen—this way!"

He led them through the two rooms on the ground floor, and then placed the ladder to enable them to ascend to the loft.

The search was a thorough one, but, of course, resulted in nothing.

They were just about to give up in despair when Jesse caught sight of the closet door.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"Only a closet," replied old Bill. "You can look in there if you wish."

He flung open the door.

The narrow space inside was wholly empty.

Old Bill Pride touched a match to his corn-cob pipe, and stood puffing away with a thoroughly self-satisfied air.

Where was Will Harwood?

Certainly not in the closet.

As for the James Boys, they stood looking at each other in perplexity, for they could think of nothing else to do.

"He's dropped off behind somewhere, that's all," said Frank. "When we thought we saw him get off the horse at the door here we were deceived."

"And so you must have been, gentlemen," said the rancher; "but looker hyar; I'm an old rebel, I am—I'm reb clear down to my boots. If there's one man more'n another I admire it's Quantrell, and for that reason I'm going to tell you something that will be of big benefit to him, and I want you to let Quantrell know that the information came from old Bill Pride."

"Good enough!" cried Frank. "I knew you had something on your mind. Out with it, old man."

"Well, it's just hyar; they are going to run down a train from Atchison to-night."

"What?" cried Jesse. "I heard they'd stopped running trains."

"And so they had, but this is a special, and there's a big lot of money on it."

"Money?"

"Yes."

"From where?"

"From the Atchison banks."

"Heavens!" cried Frank. "This is important if true."

"I'll swear it's true," replied the rancher. "The Atchison bankers are afraid of Quantrell, and they've decided to send all their money over to St. Louis, an' it goes over the road to-night."

"Who told you 'this?'"

"Now never mind who told me. I'm giving it to you straight, and I want you to report to Col. Quantrell, and let him know the information comes from old Bill Pride."

As no urging would induce the rancher to betray the source of his information, the guerrillas were forced to be satisfied.

"We'd better light out," said Jesse. "Come, boys, let's be off."

But when they stepped outside a surprise awaited them.

"Where's my horse?" cried Frank.

"And mine!" echoed Cole.

Both horses had vanished.

Nor could the slightest trace of them be discovered, after the most persistent search around the ranch.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PHANTOM TRAIN.

When Will Harwood saw the closet door close upon him he experienced a sudden desire to burst it open again and rush out.

A moment later and the James Boys came dashing up.

It was no time to show himself now, and Will stood breathlessly listening to the conversation between the outlaws and old Bill Pride.

He heard but a small part of it.

Suddenly there was a rattling sound beneath his feet.

Before Will had time to move the floor dropped.

It was horribly startling.

Down he shot into the darkness, but for no great distance.

Then the movement of the floor ceased.

"Step off that board, young fellow," said a deep voice. "Step off, and take the bags off; you're safer down here."

The sound of the voice only served to increase the mystery.

"Who are you?" Will called. "Where are you?"

"Who am I?" replied the voice. "Why, the man in the well, to be sure."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll find out pretty blamed lively if you tumble in here. Never you mind who I am. Have you got a light?"

"I've got a few matches, I believe."

"Better light one, then, and get the lay of the land. Hold on. I'm coming up!"

Will struck a match.

As the light flared up, he saw that he was standing at the mouth of a well-like hole dug in one corner of the low cellar, which appeared to extend under the entire ranch, with some of the yard and barn included.

It was filled with boxes and barrels, odd-looking pieces of machinery, and other things which Will had no time to investigate.

for just then he saw a man's head coming up out of the well hole.

Will drew his revolver and fell back.

"Hold on, there, none of that!" exclaimed the stalwart young fellow, who now sprang out of the hole. "We'll have no shooting here."

But he was armed himself, and this was what startled Will.

Just then the match went out, leaving them in total darkness.

"Keep cool," said the man from the well. "Just hold on a second until I light my lantern, and we'll see where we are at."

Will held tight to the bags with his left hand, clutching the revolver with his right.

Meanwhile the young man opened a small dark lantern, and touching a match to it, he flashed its light full into Will's face.

"Let's see, name of Harwood, ain't it?" he asked coolly. "Harwood, from Kickapoo, I believe?"

"That's who I am."

"I'm Ben Braggs—I presume you've heard of me?"

"Can't say I have."

"Then you ought to. I'm a Government secret service man—if you like, you can call me a detective."

"Oh!"

"Yes—that's what I am. Say, young fellow, I was inside there when you knocked on old Bill Pride's door."

"You were?"

"Yes; we didn't know just who you were, so I shied out. Say, I heard all you said to him pretty near."

"Well?"

"I know what you've got in them flour sacks—it's money—spondulicks—cold cash, fresh from the Kickapoo Bank."

Will's heart was in his mouth again.

"I'm a Government detective, and it's my business to help such as you. Say, tell me the whole story about this money."

"Don't you hear?"

"What?"

"Quantrell's men are overhead."

He hurried to the little platform which had brought Will down, and pulling on a rope, sent it flying up to its former position.

"That's all right. Let 'em find us now," he said. "Come, Harwood, make a clean breast of it. I'll help you if I can."

His manner was irresistible.

Will dismissed his fears, and told him all that had occurred.

"By Jove, you have had a hard time of it," he exclaimed when Will had finished. "What's your plan?"

"Plan! How can I plan with Quantrell's men upstairs? I'll be blest if I know what to do."

"Shall I tell you?"

"If you can."

"I can if you'll listen."

"What?"

"Join the Red Legs."

"Just what I want to do, but——"

"No buts. You can do it."

"How?"

"Listen!"

"I tell you I am listening."

"You think Bill Pride is an old Reb, I suppose?"

"He says so."

"Pshaw! He's nothing of the sort, but as good a Union man as you or I. He's my uncle, and I ought to know."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes. Now don't look around here. He's an old rascal, of course, and used to run a counterfeiting den here, but that's all over long ago; the gang's broken up, and—but that's neither here nor there. Harwood, there's more than one way out of this hole."

"Yes?"

"Yes, you bet there is, and it depends upon ourselves whether we stay here or not."

"But where can we go?"

"To the Red Legs."

"Do you know where they are?"

"I know where they are going to be."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that a trainload of them are coming down from Atchison to-night to join Lane."

"How will that help us?"

"It's very simple. The train will stop for me."

"The road is ten miles from here."

"Right again. And what then?"

"Can we walk it?"

"Don't intend to."

Thus saying, Mr. Ben Braggs led the way to the end of the cellar.

There was a ladder here leading to a trap door above.

Will followed his conductor up through the trap, and found himself under the barn, close by the pig pen.

"Hark!" breathed Braggs, suddenly shutting the slide of the lantern.

It was fortunate that he did so.

For just then Cole Younger and the others were searching the barn.

While their voices remained audible Will and the detective never moved.

"I don't see anything of them here; we may as well get back, boys," they heard Cole Younger say at last.

"Now is our time," breathed the detective, after they had retreated. "If we can get a couple of their horses, that's all we want."

They crawled out of their concealment, and cautiously crept around in front of the house.

The coast was clear.

There stood the horses in the moonlight.

Inside the hut loud talking could be heard.

"Good! Come on!"

They shot over to the horses.

"That's yours, Harwood," whispered the detective, pointing to Cole Younger's horse.

He chose Frank's for himself.

They leaped upon them, and drawing the reins went dashing off over the prairie.

Fortunately for the detective's plans, they were not overheard.

"Well, Harwood, that was done pretty slick, wasn't it?" the detective exclaimed.

"I should say so. I never believed we could do it."

"Listen!"

"All right—go ahead."

"I told my uncle what to say to those fellows, and I've no doubt he said it."

"What was that?"

The detective repeated the story of the treasure train.

Will listened in astonishment.

"Is it true or false?" he asked.

"Both."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Precisely what I say. It's true that the Atchison banks have decided to send their money East to-night, but it ain't true that it's going to St. Louis over the railroad."

"Where, then?"

"They'll run it down to the junction and there switch the car off onto the branch road and run to Elk Landing. The money goes by steamer from there."

"Then what I have better go with it," said Will promptly.

"Just what I was about to suggest."

"It's the best thing to do, of course; but what did you mean by saying it was true as well as false?"

"I mean that they are going to run a fake train down the road," replied the detective, "and woe betide Jesse James and the rest of his gang if they attempt to hold that train up."

The words were scarcely spoken when a sharp whistle was heard in the distance.

They were at the railroad a moment later.

Ben Braggs hastily dismounted.

"Get off! Get off!" he exclaimed. "We'll have no use for horseflesh after this."

"Do you mean to take the train?" demanded Will, jumping down.

"Mean they shall take us, you bet!"

"They're coming."

"I see 'em!"

"They won't stop for us here."

"What's the reason they won't?"

"But will they?"

"I guess yes. Just you wait and see!"

While speaking, the detective was unsaddling Frank's horse.

"I never leave anything portable behind me," he chuckled. "You better follow my lead, young fellow."

Will looked down the road at the approaching headlight.

It was swaying a good deal.

Evidently the train was coming at tremendous speed.

"Maybe they will stop, but they don't act as though they mean to," he said.

A moment more, and it became evident that they had no intention of stopping.

"By Jove! something's wrong—they won't stop!" Braggs gasped, as the locomotive and two passenger cars went sweeping by them.

They passed like a flash.

"Great heavens! What can it mean?" breathed the detective, whose face was as white as a sheet.

"Did you see?" said Will hollowly.

"See! I guess I did."

"The phantom train!"

"Stuff! Nonsense!"

"But you saw?"

"Rubbish, I say!"

Will shook his head gravely.

"I don't know about that," he said. "I'm no more superstitious than the next one, but ever since I came to live in Kickapoo I've heard of the phantom train, and if I know anything that's what we have seen to-night."

But what had they seen?

What made Will Harwood's face so white?

What made the detective stand watching the rapidly disappearing cars with a face as white as chalk in spite of his bravado?

What was this legend of the phantom train?

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAIN THAT WASN'T HELD UP AND THE TRAIN THAT WAS.

"Shall we chase 'em?"

"Chase nothing. What shall we chase?"

"Well, our horses, I reckon, Jesse James," replied Cole Younger sourly.

Sometimes Cole resented being bossed by the future bandit king.

"I see no use in starting any wild goose chase now, Cole," said Jesse more mildly.

No one disagreed with him.

But Cole was fierce for going after the horses, while the rest of the guerrillas were with Jesse, whose project was to hold up the train.

Of course, Cole had to yield.

Frank took Will Harwood's horse.

Cole and Bob doubled up.

Jesse then gave the word.

Away they dashed.

"We'll tap the railroad near the creek," said Jesse.

He bore away considerably to the east of the course taken by Will Harwood and Ben Braggs.

The ten-mile ride was made almost in silence.

At last they struck the creek, which was here broad enough to be called a river.

Following it up for a mile or more they came to the railroad.

It was a desolate spot.

Not a light was to be seen.

On all sides the prairie spread itself.

It was not at all such a place as the James Boys would have chosen for a hold-up in later days.

"Well, boys, this is where we have got to do the business," said Jesse. "You may as well dismount and hobble the horses, for goodness knows when the train will come along."

"Look! Look! She's coming now!" cried Cole.

He pointed across the prairie.

Far in the distance a bright light could be seen.

"It's the headlight of an engine, if I know anything," said Bob Younger.

They watched the light for a few moments.

"It's the train, fast enough," said Jesse.

"Going to break down the bridge?" asked Frank.

"There's no time; we must try another plan."

"What?"

"Give me that tin pail, Cole."

Cole handed over the pail which hung from his saddle.

Into this Jesse stuffed several handfuls of dry prairie grass, pressed an old newspaper down over it, and hurried forward a few rods.

Here he stood watching the approaching light.

"By Godfrey, she's going like blazes!" said Frank.

"You bet she is!"

"Better light up, hadn't you?"

"Wait a minute."

"You'll wait too long, if you ain't careful."

"Trust me."

It's no easy matter to determine the true distance of an approaching locomotive at night.

But Jesse hit it exactly.

At the right moment he lit the paper.

He had already tied a string to the handle of the pail.

Now he began to swing it to and fro.

"Of course they see it," said Frank.

"They must see it."

On came the train faster than ever.

In a moment it became perfectly evident that the engineer had no intention of stopping or even slowing down.

"Burn them, what are we to do if they won't stop?" cried Cole.

"Shoot—shoot the engineer and fireman, anyhow!" roared Jesse. He could just make his voice heard above the thundering of the train, which was now close upon them.

Dropping the pail, he raised his rifle, and stood ready.

The others followed his example.

Not a shot was fired.

"Great snakes! What's this?" gasped Cole, as the train thundered past.

Instead of a man, there in the cab stood a human skeleton with its hand on throttle.

The fleshless face, with eyeless sockets and grinning teeth, was turned toward the guerrillas, and seemed to regard them with a sardonic smile.

"Heavens!" cried Jesse. "What was that?"

"By gosh, it's a ghost train!" gasped Cole Younger, who was perhaps the most superstitious among them all.

"Rubbish!" sneered Frank.

"Did you see anybody in the cars?" questioned Jesse.

"Not a soul," said Frank.

"The windows were all hung with black," declared Bob Younger.

"There wasn't no brakemen on the platform," added Jim.

"Nor any lights behind," said Jesse.

"It's all a fake, got up on purpose for such fellows as we are," chuckled Frank.

There was a wide difference of opinion here, and a great deal of talk and discussion followed.

Cole warmly advocated the ghost theory.

Frank continued to pooh-pooh it.

Jesse remained neutral, and let them fight it out.

"Well, one thing is sure, anyhow," he said at last.

"What's that?" demanded Cole.

"A train went over the road, just as old Bill Pride said it would."

"It did," said Frank, "and, what's more, it had the money on it, I'll bet."

"Shouldn't wonder," replied Jesse. "In my opinion, boys, the Red Legs have been one too many for us—we are badly left."

The words were scarcely spoken when another headlight was discovered in the distance.

It created the greatest excitement.

"What in thunder does that mean?" Cole exclaimed.

"Another train coming, that's what!" cried Jesse.

"Sure as you're born," said Frank. "This time we must make a go of it or burst."

"We can be sure of nothing here," said Jesse. "Mount, boys! Let's cross the creek and see if we can't find a better place."

Over the bridge the guerrillas went dashing.

At the end of half a mile the light of the approaching train did not seem to have gained perceptibly upon them.

Jesse, who kept a sharp lookout ahead, suddenly gave a joyful shout.

"By Godfrey, we've got it now," he cried.

It was a pile of old ties lying alongside the track.

The guerrillas dashed up to them, and halted.

"The very thing!" cried Frank.

"You bet your sweet life," said Jesse. "They'll stop this time or we'll throw the train."

Active moments followed.

The guerrillas hastily dismounted, and went to work.

The ties were piled upon the track.

Jesse drew aside, and lighting the paper in the pail, began waving it back and forth.

"There's some one alive there, at all events," cried Frank.

For a man's head had suddenly appeared at the cab window.

They could just see it and no more.

Instantly the whistle sounded.

The train was slowing down.

"We've got 'em," chuckled Jesse. "By Godfrey, we've got 'em!"

He stopped waving.

Slower and slower the train moved, stopping at last a hundred feet or so from the pile of ties.

"What's the row?" called the engineer, leaning out of the cab.

"Some scoundrel has piled them ties there," answered Jesse.

"We thought we'd let you know, and save the train if we could."

"What you waiting for?" whispered Cole.

"The conductor—he's coming!" breathed Jesse. "Cover him, Cole, as soon as he's near enough."

The conductor, who was hurrying forward, lantern in hand, now shouted to the engineer to know what the matter was.

"Can't you see?" snipped the knight of the throttle, who was evidently in very bad humor.

"Ties on the track? By thunder, yes!"

"Hands up, old man!" yelled Cole, suddenly raising his rifle.

"Hands up, you fellers in the cab!" shouted Jesse, as he and Frank covered the fireman and the engineer.

With blanched faces, the three men threw their hands high above their heads.

"Tumble out, there! Tumble out!" ordered Jesse.

"Boys!" he added, "look to the brakemen—there ain't a moment to be lost."

"I knowed it! They're Quantrell's men!" gasped the engineer.

"Go ahead, there!" ordered Jesse. "Put a hundred yards between yourselves and them ties, and the first man who attempts to return until I give the word will be dropped in his tracks."

It was very humiliating.

But the conductor, engineer and fireman saw nothing to it but to obey.

Without ceremony, the three outlaws burst into the first car, pushing aside the frightened brakemen, who offered no resistance.

There were but three passengers in the car.

One was a sheriff from Atchison, the others merchants in that town.

As the outlaws burst in each fired a shot.

Hands went up in a hurry.

"Go through 'em, Cole!" cried Jesse. "Rob the blamed Union shriekers of their last penny! Frank, you follow me."

The money was taken from the two merchants.

The sheriff had less than five dollars about him, but Cole took even that, and went dashing into the next car.

Here there were more passengers.

Jesse and Frank had four men with their hands up.

Besides these, there was a young girl, who appeared to take matters rather coolly.

"Where are they? Where are the other two fellows?" roared Jesse, as Cole entered. "I'll swear I saw five men when we came in."

"I'm sure I don't know, gentlemen," gasped the man addressed. "For heaven's sake, spare my life!"

"Tell me where they are—tell me, some one, or I'll shoot you all!" roared Jesse. "Sit down, there, girl, sit down, or you will be the first to die!"

For the girl had carelessly risen and moved toward the door.

Instead of obeying, she suddenly reached for the door and flung it wide open.

As she did so two men leaped up from some concealment.

One began firing through the car.

The other, who held a well-stuffed flour sack in each hand, made a dash through the open door.

Three times the man fired.

Cole Younger and the James Boys ducked in the aisle.

"By Godfrey, the boy—the money!" roared Jesse.

Firing as he ran crouching, Jesse made for the rear of the car.

But the man did not wait for his coming.

With a wild yell of defiance he discharged his revolver once again, and went dashing after his companion and the girl who had run out through the door.

CHAPTER VI.

CHASING THE PHANTOM TRAIN.

"Where are they? Where are they?"

"Blamed if I know!"

"Great Godfrey, the earth can't have opened and swallowed them! Where are they, I say?"

But it was of use for Jesse to storm and rave.

Frank, who had followed him out of the car, could no more explain the sudden vanishing of the fugitives than he could himself.

Cole Younger, meanwhile, had remained behind to serve the four men as he had served the three in the other car.

Nor did he have any difficulty in so doing.

With the bold dash of the two men and the girl, it seemed as if all the courage there was on the train had gone with them.

The four men submitted to Cole tamely enough.

The result was more watches, more revolvers, and another wad of greenbacks to be added to Cole's already well-filled pockets.

But to return to Jesse and Frank.

"They went that way, and I'll swear to it," growled Frank, waving his hand to the right of the train.

"Of course they did. I fired twice before you got outside. Do you s'pose I'm blind that I didn't see?"

"But what in thunder became of them?"

"Just what I can't make out. They seemed to drop out of sight all in a minute."

"Blamed if I can understand it all."

"Strange!"

"So blame strange that I can't make head nor tail to it."

"By Godfrey! Look! There's some one moving in that grass now!"

"Where?"

"There! Don't you see?"

Yes, Jesse did see.

In an unlucky moment Will Harwood—for he it was who lay crouching among the prairie grass—had raised his head.

Jesse made a rush for the spot, followed by Frank.

"Move an inch and you die!" he shouted. "I'm right onto you!"

Crack!

Crack!

heedless of the warning, Will raised himself and fired two shots.

It was the last effort.

Both shots were failures.

In an instant Jesse James flung himself upon the boy and wrenched the revolver away.

"Do you surrender, or shall I kill you?" he hissed.

With a cocked revolver pressed against his forehead, Will could do nothing but yield.

"I surrender."

"You are wise."

"I can't help myself—that's all."

"You surrender, that's enough. Where is that other fellow? Where is the girl?"

"I don't know."

"Look here, Jesse!" cried Frank jubilantly. "I guess this is about what we want."

While Jesse was talking Frank went poking about among the high grass.

"Now, with an air of triumph, he held up the two flour sacks.

"By Godfrey, you've got 'em!" chuckled Jesse. "Young feller, your goose is cooked!"

"You'll deal with me as you please, I presume," replied Will, "but only a coward would attack a wounded and helpless man."

"Are you wounded?"

"Look at my left arm."

"Ha! You're right. At least one of my shots told."

"You don't need to tell me that."

"No back talk. What's your name?"

"William Harwood."

"Where are you from?"

"I belong in Kickapoo."

"Who was the old man with you at the creek?"

"He was Mr. Pierce."

"Of Kickapoo?"

"Yes."

"Keeps the store and runs the bank?"

"He did."

"Ha, ha, ha! He'll run it no more. Boy, you are a good one. How did you manage to give us the slip at old Bill Pride's ranch?"

"By hiding."

"Hiding where?"

"Where I could put my hands on a better horse."

"Answer my question."

"How can I answer it? I dropped down behind the fence. You didn't happen to go where I was—that's all."

"Then Pride didn't know you were there?"

"How should he when he was inside the hut?"

"And this fellow who fired at me—who is he?"

"I don't know."

"And the girl?"

"Is a stranger to me. I met her on the train, too."

"But you must know more."

"I tell you I don't. I just ran, and I don't know what became of them."

"Wasn't it a put-up job between you?"

"To a certain extent—yes."

"Well, how?"

"Oh, that man offered to help me defend the money. I explained to him that it belonged to the widows and orphans Quantrell has made in Kickapoo, and they said they'd help."

"Where were you hiding?"

"Under the last seat."

"Come, come, Jess!" interrupted Frank. "What in thunder is the use of all this questioning? Have you forgotten what we held up the train for? Have you forgotten that we've left Cole all alone to guard those men?"

Yes, Jesse had forgotten in his curiosity to learn all Will Harwood had to tell.

But he only needed to be reminded of it to spur him on to action.

"March!" he ordered, pushing Will ahead of him. "Move to the right or the left, and you are a dead man!"

They hurried back to the car.

Cole Younger met them at the door.
His face wore a look of complacent triumph.
"What in thunder are you doing there, Cole?" demanded Jesse.
"Where are your prisoners?"
"Where are they—well, they're safe, that's what."
"I should hope so."
"A fat lot you care."
"Come, come, Cole!"
"Oh, it's all very well to say come, come! You and Frank light out and leave me to guard nine men."
"Nine! How nine?"
"How nine! Can't you count? There's four in this car, and three in the other, besides, the two brakemen, and b'gosh I've done 'em all."
"What—not killed 'em?"
"Killed nobody. I've got 'em all tied up."
"Good boy, Cole!" cried Jesse.
And positively it was a pretty smooth piece of work that Cole had done.
With one revolver and one pair of hands he had tied every man to his seat, and there he was calmly awaiting Jesse's return.
But Cole soon got over his vexation when Frank held up the bags.
"By gosh! Did you get 'em?" he cried.
"We did. Wasn't it worth working for?" chuckled Frank.
"I should say so; but how about the rest?"
"Just what we are after now," said Jesse. "Here, tie this fellow up, too, and we'll tackle the baggage car. I don't doubt that the bank money is in there."
"I hain't got no more rope, Jesse."
"Where did you get what you used?"
"Found it in the car here, but I used it all up."
"Blame it, that's too bad! Hold on, though. I've got a piece of pretty strong string here. Tie him to the step of the car, and we'll decide what to do with him after we are through."
Jesse handed over the string, and Cole did the trying, remarking as he did so that the string was none too strong.
"It will do, I reckon," replied Jesse. "Come on!"
They hurried to the freight car and tried to open the door.
It was nailed fast.
But this did not prevent the James Boys from entering.
Among the other traps which he carried attached to his saddle Jesse had a short-handled axe.
Aided by this, they cut their way into the car.
Greatly to their disgust, they found it entirely empty.
"A fake," said Frank grimly, as they stood staring in.
"What do you mean?" demanded Jesse.
"Simply that the phantom train was the one we ought to have held up, not this."
"By Godfrey, I believe you are right."
"Better make sure," suggested Cole.
"But how?"
"The conductor will probably know."
"Hello, there, Conductor!" he shouted. "Hello! I want you."
The man came up meekly enough.
He was evidently a perfect coward.
As he stood before Jesse he trembled like a leaf.
"Say, neighbor, what train was that just ahead of you?" Jesse demanded.
"There was no train ahead of me that I know of," stammered the man.
"There wasn't, eh?"
"No."
"I say there was."
"Did—did you actually see a train, gentlemen?" he asked.
"We certainly did," said Jesse.
"Wha—what kind of a looking man was the engineer?"
"Well, he was a hungry looking fellow," chuckled Jesse.
Frank and Cole laughed.
"I suspect," said the conductor, with a shudder, "that you have seen the phantom train."
"What in blazes do you mean by the phantom train?"
"Did you never hear the story?"
"Never. Tell it."
"Why, there was a train wrecked at the creek some years ago; cars were burned, engineer and fifty passengers were killed or roasted alive. Since then they say that the train runs down the road once a year on the night of the anniversary of the disaster. Of course I don't know anything about it myself, for I never saw it; but that's what they say—"

"You wretched liar!" he hissed. "Own up that your phantom train has on board the money of the Atchison banks."
The conductor turned deathly pale.
"Don't shoot—don't shoot!" he stammered, falling back.
"I'll scatter your brains over the prairie if you don't own up," bellowed Frank. "One, two—"

"Stop! I cave!" gasped the man.
"Well?"
"It is as you say."
"I thought so. The money was on board?"
The conductor nodded.
His teeth chattered so that he could not speak.
"Where are they heading for?" demanded Frank.
"Elk Landing."
"For a steamer?"
"Yes."
"The money is going down to St. Louis by the steamer?"
"Yes."
"Who was in the cars behind those black curtains?"
"Some of General Lane's men."
"How many?"
"I don't know."
"Twenty?"
"As many as that—perhaps more. I didn't see the train start, but don't kill me, gentlemen, for the love of Heaven, don't kill me!"
"Get out with you!" sneered Frank. "Send the engineer here."
The conductor hurried off, fully expecting to be shot in the back at every step.
"What do you want with the engineer, Frank?" demanded Jesse.
"My idea was to chase this phantom train."
"Good enough!"
"You agree with me?"
"Of course."
"And you, Cole?"
"Oh, I shan't object; but what about the horses?"
"We can put them in the freight car," said Bob Younger, for he and Jim had been listening to all this.
The Younger boys hurried off to attend to the horses.
Just then the engineer came up.
"We want you to run this train down to Elk Landing," said Jesse.
"Well?" replied the engineer quietly.
"You'll do it?"
"I suppose I've got to do it."
"You have."
The next few moments were busy ones.
By the aid of the broken door the guerrillas managed to get the horses into the freight car.
The prisoners were hustled out of the passenger car without ceremony.
All this time Jesse had kept hold of the precious flour sacks.
These he now stowed away in the cab, meaning to ride there himself.
No one paid any attention to Will Harwood while these things were going on, although Jesse glanced at him once or twice as he hurried back and forth.
Will was lying on the ground, with his arms and legs tied up, where Cole had left him.
"What about that boy?" asked Frank, when all were ready to start.
"We'll take him along a piece, and drop him somewhere," said Jesse. "I don't want him telling those other fellows about the money."
"Better shoot him," said Cole.
"No, I won't do that. Bring him up here, boys."
Cole started to obey.
"By thunder, he ain't there!" he exclaimed, before he had taken a dozen steps.
It was so.
Will had vanished.
Frank hurried over to the place where they had left the boy, but not a trace of him could be found.
"Never mind," called Jesse. "Let him go. I told you that string didn't amount to anything, Cole."
It seemed but little importance then what had become of Will, and Jesse hurried on the start.
The engineer was ordered into the cab.
Frank and Jesse followed.
Cole undertook to act as brakeman, while Jim and Bob took charge of the horses.
"Let her rip!" cried Jesse, when all was ready.
The engineer pulled the lever.
In a moment they were thundering over the prairie at a good thirty miles an hour.

Jesse was in a high state of exhilaration.

"This is immense," he exclaimed. "If we capture the treasure train, and I'm betting we will, Quantrell will have no chance to kick."

"That's right."

"Engineer, is there any chance of overhauling that train before it strikes the branch?"

"Not a bit," replied the engineer decidedly.

"How fast are we going now?"

"About thirty miles an hour."

"How fast can the machine run?"

"Forty at the outside."

"Make it forty."

"We run a risk."

"Make it forty, I say!"

"All right."

Frank piled on the coal with all the skill of an old fireman.

Speed was increased.

They were flying over the prairie like lightning now.

"We may as well count that money," said Frank at last.

"I suppose we might," replied Jesse.

"I'm curious to see how much of a haul we've made."

And with the engineer watching them they emptied the flour sacks and went to work.

The entire amount footed up a little less than ten thousand dollars.

It was mostly in old State bank bills of low denomination.

Jesse eyed the pile in disgust.

"Say, if we bust all the banks in Kansas what the blazes good will these bills be?" he remarked.

"Hello!" cried the engineer, suddenly drawing his head in from the cab window, where he had been looking ahead. "Just take a squint out here, will you, and tell me what I'm to do."

"What's the matter?" demanded Jesse.

"Matter of a signal."

Jesse thrust his head out of the cab window.

Frank prudently gathered up the bills and gold and swept them back into the flour sacks.

"I see a light!" cried Jesse.

"Red, ain't it?" questioned the engineer.

"Yes."

"It's a signal."

"For us to stop?"

"Of course."

"What station?"

"Miser."

"No town, is it?"

"No, just a flag station. They go over to Cameron from there."

"It's a red light fast enough, and it's waving," Jesse said. "Frank, what's to be done?"

"I suppose we've got to stop," said Frank, keeping his eye on the engineer and the bags.

"I s'pose we have."

"Slow down," cried Jesse.

"It must be stop or nothing," said the engineer, seizing the lever.

"Stop, then."

As the train slowed down, Jesse continued on the watch.

"I see the station!" he cried. "There's only one man there."

"See anything of the other train?" asked Frank.

"No."

"Sure there's only one man?"

"I only see one. Look for yourself."

"No, thank you. I've got all I want to attend to watching these bags. I'll bet a dollar it's the Red Legs trying our game."

"Shove the bags out of the way!" cried Jesse. "By Godfrey, you may be right!"

Frank opened the locker and dropped the bags inside just as the train came to a standstill.

"Hello, there!" shouted Jesse. "What's the row?"

"This!" cried the man, dropping the lantern and covering Jesse with a revolver. "Hands up, there, neighbor, unless you want to die!"

Instead of obeying, Jesse caught at his own weapon.

Crack!

Crack!

Instantly two shots came whizzing into the cab.

hope to Will Harwood as he lay a prisoner near the held-up train.

He lay motionless, waiting.

Behind him he could hear a slight rustling among the high prairie grass, but he heard nothing before the voice spoke.

In a second a hand touched him.

Some one was cutting his bonds.

"You're free now," breathed the voice. "Don't try to rise, but just follow me."

Will rolled over, perceiving as he did so a dark form crawling away through the grass.

He recognized the girl who had opened the door of the car at the time of Jesse's attack.

Now, to Will this girl was an entire stranger.

With the detective, he had boarded the second train when it came along, for the engineer stopped readily on Ben Braggs' signal at the little flag station whither they had hurried after the phantom train went by.

When they entered the car the girl was sitting in the seat immediately behind the one they took.

But they had not spoken to her, and it was an entire surprise to Will when she opened the door and followed them out of the car.

But it was no time to question the girl's motives now.

Will simply followed her through the grass.

Every instant he expected to hear the shots behind him.

None came, however.

Just then the James Boys were busy getting the horses into the freight car.

They could not have chosen a more favorable time.

Presently the girl stopped and rose to her feet.

"Come!"

"Where?"

"To your friend."

"You mean Mr. Braggs?"

"I don't know his name, but you know who I mean."

"Of course. Where is he?"

"Near. I'll take you to him."

They hurried on side by side.

Will was wondering who his fair conductor could be.

At length he ventured to ask her.

"My name is Etta Rivers," replied the girl quietly. "Possibly you remember me, Will Harwood? I knew you as soon as you got on board the train."

"I can't seem to remember."

"I've often been in Mr. Pierce's store at Kickapoo."

"And seen me there?"

"Yes."

"Strange I can't recollect."

"Not at all, so many came in and out; I lived near Duncan with my father."

"Ah! I remember Mr. Rivers, of Duncan, well enough."

"I thought you would. Perhaps you don't know that my father is dead?"

"Indeed, I didn't. And I am very sorry to hear it."

"He was killed by Quantrell's men in Missouri a month ago."

"In Missouri?"

"Yes. He joined Lane, and they killed him."

How cool she was!

Will could not but regard her with wonder.

"Stop now—here we are," she said finally.

Will looked around in some perplexity.

There was nothing to be seen, and when the girl bent down among the grass Will wondered what she was about.

He understood an instant later.

Up came a large wooden trap door, beneath which was a flight of steps leading down.

"We go here," said said. "Will Harwood, follow me."

She led the way down the steps, Will following, of course.

In a moment the girl had opened a door, revealing a lighted room comfortably furnished.

Upon a bed in one corner lay Ben Braggs looking very white.

"Heavens! You did get him!" he exclaimed. "By thunder, Harwood, I'm a used-up man."

"Not quite so bad as that, I hope," said Will, hurrying to the bed.

"I'm afraid those infernal guerrillas have fixed me. Where's the money? Did they get it away from you?"

"I'm sorry to say they did," sighed Will; "but we won't think of that now. Is there nothing I can do to help you?"

"Nothing here; but you can help me in another way if you will."

"How? Anything I can do, you may be sure I will."

"Then listen. I am out on an important mission for General Lane, and have certain dispatches which must be delivered to him at the earliest possible moment. I cannot take them now, but you can, and if you will it will ease my mind greatly."

CHAPTER VII.

JOINING THE RED LEGS.

"Hist! Don't speak! I'll save you if I can!"

These words breathed in his ear brought the first touch of

"I will; but where do I go?"

"Know the old grist mill near Bradish?"

"Yes, I do. And Lane there, unless he has already moved upon the mill, which I don't think likely, for he can't have got word of the Kickapoo raid yet."

"But that's ten miles from here, if I walk——"

"Walk—you haven't got to walk."

"What do you mean?"

"You shall have a horse. I expected to leave the train at Miser, and walk over to the mill, which is not more than a mile, but for you to walk now would be nonsense; you wouldn't get there before morning."

"But where's the horse to come from?"

"Etta will show you—she'll be back in a moment."

"You seem to know this girl."

"Well, rather. I ought to."

"But you didn't speak to her on the train?"

"Now, don't ask too many questions, Harwood. All this seems very mysterious to you, but it's simple enough. The guerrillas just happened to hold us up near this place, and it was mighty lucky for me that they did, the way things have turned out. Will you go?"

"Yes, yes. I told you I would."

"Then here are the dispatches," said the detective, taking from his pocket a small packet of papers. "You will give them to no one but Lane himself. Tell him that I'm in bad shape, but I still hope a night's rest may fix me up all right. Of course, you'll tell him where I am and what happened. Ah! Here is Etta now! Is the horse ready? I want Harwood to start at once."

"All ready," replied the girl, who had just entered.

"All right! Follow her, Harwood, and good luck attend you. Probably we shall meet again before long."

Thus saying, Ben Bragg turned over, closed his eyes, and seemed to settle himself down to sleep.

A good deal mystified, Will followed the girl through a door at the other end of the apartment.

"This is our stable," said Etta, pointing to two splendid horses who stood in their stalls. "I suppose you are wondering a good deal about this place, but it's no use to ask me any questions, for I shan't answer them. Take your pick and be off."

"How am I to get out?"

"I'll show you. Which horse will you have?"

"I'll take this roan."

"All right. There's the saddle. Get ready."

Will had the horse saddled in no time.

Etta then took the lantern, which she had brought with her from the other room, and opening another door went ahead.

Will followed, leading the horse up a gentle incline.

There was a larger trap door, at the end of which Etta turned over, and the horse was led up upon the prairie.

"What in the world is this place, anyhow?" demanded Will, his curiosity more than ever excited at the completeness of these arrangements.

"Didn't I tell you not to question me?"

"I suppose I must get along without knowing," laughed Will, as he mounted.

"You'll have to, I'm thinking. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

The last Will saw of her she was still standing there watching him.

He could see the light of the lantern long after the girl herself ceased to be visible.

Deeply impressed by the strangeness of all these happenings, the boy galloped on under the stars.

He knew the prairie fairly well, and with the railroad to guide him, found no difficulty in making his way to the mill.

As he came in sight of the ruinous old structure he was suddenly challenged by a soldier wearing the blue, who seemed to rise right out of the ground.

"Halt!" came the cry, and Will found himself covered with a rifle.

"He reined in, and the guard advanced.

"I'm sent with dispatches for General Lane."

"You have the countersign?"

"No."

"Then you can't pass."

"But I must. My business is important."

"You can't!"

"You can take word to Gen. Lane?"

"That depends—what word have you to send?"

"Tell him Mr. Bragg is wounded and I have been sent with the dispatches in his place."

The guard hesitated.

"I don't know about this," he said suspiciously, "but I suppose I'll have to chance it."

He whistled.

In a moment a man came out of the little hollow where the roof of the mill could just be seen.

"Pass the word to the general that a man is here with dispatches from one Braggs," said the guard.

The man hurried back, and in about ten minutes returned.

"You are to follow me," he said to Will, and he led him down into the hollow, halting before the door of the mill.

Will glanced around curiously.

His conductor gave him little time to look, however, but hurried him into the mill, and in a moment Will found himself ushered into the presence of the redoubtable Jim Lane, leader of the Red Legs, whose name was execrated by all adherents to the cause of the South.

There were several other officers present.

They were seated about a table which was littered with maps and papers.

"Well, what do you want, young man?" demanded Lane, beckoning Will to approach.

"I came from Mr. Braggs, General. He sent me with these papers," replied Will, handing over the packet.

"Why didn't he come himself?"

"He has been wounded—he could not."

While the dispatches were being read, Will was forced to wait outside.

After about twenty minutes the guard came with word that the general wished to see him.

This time Will found him alone.

"Young man, what is your name?" demanded Lane, as Will walked up to the table.

"Will Harwood, sir."

"You say you were Mr. Pierce's clerk?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's too bad about poor Pierce. He was a good friend of mine. I shall send to the creek and see that his remains are properly cared for. I wish now to thank you for your faithful delivery of the dispatches, which are of the highest importance."

"I'm sure you are very welcome, sir."

"That's all right; but I have sent for you for another purpose. Now that Mr. Pierce is dead and Kickapoo probably in ashes, what do you propose to do?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir."

"Do you belong in Kickapoo?"

"Oh, no, sir. I have only been there a year."

"Where are you from?"

"St. Louis."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir."

"You are large for your age. Father and mother living?"

"No, sir. I never knew my father and mother."

"Ah! An orphan?"

"Yes."

"You have other relatives, I presume?"

"No, sir. I was brought up in an orphan asylum at St. Louis," replied Will, coloring. "I really know nothing about myself."

"How would you like to join us. We need just such fellows as you."

"I don't know but what I should like it. I——"

"Wait! Let me speak plainer. The fact is, Harwood, young Braggs was engaged by me for special duty, and to have him taken now puts me to a great inconvenience, for he has only half completed his work. If you will join us I shall turn his mission over to you, for I think you are just the fellow to carry it out to a successful finish. Come, what do you say?"

"I am ready, sir."

"What, you have decided so quick?"

"Yes."

"If you like to take time to think it over——"

"No; I have decided I can't go back to Kickapoo, and as I've got to do something, I may as well join the army and fight for my country as anything else."

"Spoken like a man—like the brave fellow I take you to be! You shall sign the roll at once, for I want to send you off on special duty this very night."

"I am ready, sir."

"It will require all your courage, all the discretion you can exercise."

"I'll do my best."

"Of that I am certain, or I should not select you for the duty. I suppose you are wondering what it is that I want you to do?"

"It is rather puzzling me."

"Naturally. Young man, what you are to do is to mount the horse which brought you here and take these papers to Col. Quantrell wherever you can find him."

"To Quantrell!" cried Will in amazement.

And his heart almost failed him.

For Quantrell in Kansas, at the time of which we write, was looked upon as a fiend incarnate.

The mere mention of his name was sufficient to strike terror to the stoutest heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RUSH INTO KIRKMAN.

"Hands up! Hands up, or you die!"

Again the cry from the man on the ground.

But in spite of the shots which came within one of putting a finish to his career, Jesse James neither raised his hands nor drew his revolver.

Instead, he simply thrust his head out of the cab window, and shouted:

"Hello, Jim!"

"Great snakes! That you, Jess?" called the man on the ground.

"Well, I reckon."

"Jerusalem crickets. Is that so?"

"Of course it's so. What in thunder's the matter with you, Jim Cummins, firing at a friend?"

"Gosh, Jess, I didn't know it was you! Is that Frank in there with you?"

"Certain."

"Hello, Frank!"

"Hello!" growled Frank, but he did not look out of the cab and lose sight of the bags.

"What did you stop this train for, Jim Cummins?" demanded Jesse.

Jim gave a chuckling laugh, and whistled.

Immediately a round dozen of rough-looking men appeared on the scene.

They came from each side of the station.

All were heavily armed, carrying rifles in their hands, with revolvers and bowie knives thrust in their belts.

These were Quantrell's men—men whom the James Boys knew perfectly well.

Immediately there was a great shouting back and forth, for Cole Younger and his brothers were on the alert, too.

"What the blazes is it all about, anyway?" demanded Cole, hanging off the car.

"Why, we were trying to hold up the train," explained Jim, who was exploding with laughter. "Ha, ha, ha! It's a rich joke."

"We got ahead of you, there," said Jesse grimly. "On whose orders did you start to take this train?"

"Quantrell's."

Jesse jumped from the cab and drew Jim aside.

"What were you told to do after you held the train up?" he demanded.

"Well, now, I don't know as Quantrell wants me to tell you."

"Was it to look out for a lot of money from the Atchison banks?"

"Humph! You know a blame sight too much."

"I know, Jim. Look here, we're on the same lay."

"You are?"

"Yes."

"You held up the train?"

"Of course."

"Did you get the money, Jess?"

"Get it, no! The money has gone down to Elk Landing by the other train."

"What other train?"

"Pshaw! You don't know anything. How long have you been here?"

"Only a few minutes."

"I thought so. Jim, the money Quantrell sent you after has gone down to Elk Landing. It's to be shipped on a steamer to St. Louis."

"That so?"

"Yes."

"What's to be done?"

"I don't know what you are going to do, but I'm going after it."

After a good deal of talk, it was decided that the James Boys and the Youngers should abandon the train and all hands put it through to Elk Landing on their horses.

"We ought to fetch it by daylight," Jesse said to Frank, after the matter was decided.

"I should say so."

"You agree with me that it's the best thing to do?"

"The only thing to do. We had no show going down alone, anyhow."

"Perhaps not. Keep mum about the bags, Frank."

"Trust me, Jess. There'll be no questions answered if the boys ask any, you bet!"

"What about the engineer?"

"Of course we can't leave him behind to run the train down to the Landing."

"Well, hardly."

"Shall we shoot him?"

"He seems to be a decent sort of fellow; suppose we take him along a piece and drop him on the road?"

This was decided upon.

Preparations for the start began at once.

The horses in the freight car were taken out.

Explaining as much of the situation as he cared to have him know to the engineer, Jesse ordered him upon a spare horse which happened to be with Jim Cummins' party.

The train was then abandoned, and the dash over the prairie began.

They kept near the track, as, being unacquainted with the country, there was a good chance of their missing their way.

After five miles had been covered, the engineer was dropped.

The made made no protest—he was only too glad to get away.

On they dashed.

"What's that?" cried Frank, pointing off in the distance on the right.

"Where—what?"

"Don't you see?"

"Godfrey, yes! What is it? A house?"

"Blamed if I know!"

"Why, it's cars upset, that's what," exclaimed Jesse, after they had advanced a little further.

"That's what it is."

"What can it mean?"

"Give it up; but here's the branch."

They soon knew the truth.

Dashing along the line of the branch, they came up to the wreck.

It was the phantom train.

Evidently the locomotive had exploded its boiler.

There was little left but a mass of old iron scattered about in every direction.

One of the cars was off the track, and was badly shattered, while the other held its place on the rails.

On the ground, near the ruins of the cab lay the body of a man horribly mutilated.

Close by was the skeleton which had so terrified Cole Younger.

It was evidently from some medical college or doctor's office, for the bones were properly articulated.

It lay on its back near the dead man, and was not injured in the least.

"By thunder, this is a great smash-up," exclaimed Jesse.

"Wonder how it happened?" said Frank.

"I'm wondering if there's any of the money in these cars," remarked Cole, giving the skeleton a spiteful kick.

But there was nothing in the cars.

Nor were any other bodies.

"They've just hurried on to the Landing and abandoned everything," said Jesse. "On, boys, on! We're dead sure to overtake them! The game is all in our own hands now!"

They sprang to their saddles and dashed on.

Soon the sun rose.

"By Godfrey, I'll bet you what you like them fellows will stop at Kirkman," exclaimed Frank.

"Wouldn't wonder a bit," said Cole.

"If they are there we'll have 'em!" cried Jesse. "On, boys, on!"

Ten minutes later and there was great excitement in the peaceful town of Kirkman.

The guerrillas entered at the west end of Main Street, yelling like demons, and firing their revolvers right and left.

A dozen men, hastily arming themselves, drew up across the street, just beyond the Boston Hotel, and opened fire.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

The shots went flying toward the guerrillas, bringing them to a halt.

Three men dropped.

Two were dead, one badly wounded.

Emboldened by this, the townsmen made a dash.

Now this was just what Jesse was waiting for.

"Let 'em come!" he cried. "Wait until they come within fifty feet of us, and then blaze away."

"Now!" shouted Jesse.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Every rifle was discharged.

"I reckon that's fixed him," said Jesse coolly.

Of the twelve brave men who had made the attack, but one remained, and he was running for cover at the top of his speed.

The others had measured their length upon the ground to a man.

Some were dead, others wounded.

The victory was complete.

"I reckon that fixes the business," said Jesse. "Clean 'em out, boys! Then follow me!"

Thus saying, Jesse dashed up to the Boston Hotel, followed by Frank and Cole.

"Cole, you'd better stay by Frank. We don't want to lose what we've already got."

The bags were attached to either side of Frank's saddle.

Heeding his brother's warning, Frank kept his seat.

Meanwhile, Jesse began thundering at the door of the hotel, which was closed.

There was no response for a moment or two.

Again and again he struck the butt of his revolver against the door.

"Break it in," said Cole.

"Easier said than done," said Jesse, putting his shoulder against the door.

"Hold on! There's some one at the window," said Frank.

Jesse drew back.

At an upper window stood a man looking out.

He held a gun, but did not seem disposed to use it.

His face was as pale as death.

"Gentlemen, in heaven's name, what do you want?" he demanded.

"Are you the landlord?" called Jesse.

"I—I am."

"We want you to come down and open the door."

He hastily closed the window, and in a moment could be heard descending the stairs.

By the time he got the door open the gang had come up, and pretty well filled the street in front of the hotel.

If the landlord had contemplated any resistance, he abandoned the idea now.

Behind him were three men, armed with shotguns, like himself.

"Drop those guns!" shouted Jesse. "Drop 'em, or we fire!"

The guns were dropped in a hurry.

"Landlord, come out here," was the next command.

The landlord stepped out upon the piazza, trembling from head to foot.

"You asked me what we wanted here a moment ago?" said Jesse.

"Y—yes!"

"I am going to tell you now."

"Anything I can do to serve you, gentlemen, I am sure——"

"Dry up! Speak when you're spoken to. First of all, order beds made ready for four of my men who are wounded."

"Yes, captain, yes, sir. It shall be done."

"Say, Jess, we only need two beds," said Bob Younger.

"There were four men wounded, Bob."

"I know, but two are dead."

"Who are they?"

"A couple of my men, Jess," said Jim Cummins. "They are new recruits—you don't know either of them."

"All right. Let 'em rip! Bring the wounded in."

"Sh-shall I go now and fix the beds, captain?" asked the landlord.

"No; send one of your men."

The landlord gave the order, and the man departed.

"Now, then, send to your cook," said Jesse, "and order the best breakfast your house affords for all hands."

"My conscience!" groaned the landlord, "I couldn't begin to feed you all."

"You must."

"It's impossible!"

"You'll do it or die!"

"All right—all right, captain! I'll do the best I can, but I shall have to go myself."

"Wait."

"Lord help us, what now?"

"Have you heard of a train wreck up the road?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I thought so. How did you hear?"

"Some of the parties who were on the train were in here this morning and told us."

"Who were they?"

"Atchison men. I don't remember their names, but one was Mr. Milligan, the conductor of the train."

"What happened?"

"The engine blew up, I believe."

"Landlord!"

"Yes, captain, yes!"

"Did those men bring anything with them?"

"No—I don't know."

"What?"

Up went the rifle.

"Yes, yes, they did."

"I thought so. What was it?"

"A trunk."

"Ha! What was done with it?"

"They took it to the bank."

"Where is the bank?"

The landlord pointed dumbly to a small brick building on the opposite side of the street a little further down.

"Do you know what was in the trunk?" demanded Jesse.

"No, I don't."

"Be careful."

"I swear I don't know. It was said there was money, but I don't know anything about it myself."

"And where did the Atchison men go after they left the trunk at the bank?"

"They took horses and went to Elk Landing."

"All?"

"All but one."

"Ha! The conductor, I suppose?"

"No, he went. It was one of the others."

"The very man we want," said Jesse. "Where is he now?"

"I suppose he's up at the bank—I'm sure I don't know."

"All right; see that you have breakfast ready by the time we are ready for it," said Jesse.

He flung himself into the saddle and led the gang to the bank.

Like every other building on Main Street, except the hotel, the bank was tightly closed.

But it was broken into without any trouble, the cashier and an assistant making but slight resistance, during which they were both wounded. The guerrillas found two trunks, and soon rifled them of their contents.

They were filled with money and papers.

There was considerable gold and many thousand bank notes and various securities.

A hasty glance told Jesse that he had made a big haul.

No further time was wasted.

It was nothing to Jesse where the money came from so long as they got it.

Cole was dispatched to the hotel for bags, and soon returned with three stout sacks, which proved large enough to hold all the cash.

By the time they were ready to depart the cashier had fallen to the floor, and lay there in a fainting condition.

Leaving him where he was, the guerrillas returned to the hotel.

Great was the excitement when the news of the important capture was communicated to the men.

But Jesse, knowing the wild spirits he had to deal with, took every precaution to guard the treasure.

The contents of the two flour sacks were put into another bag.

This, with the other three, was placed on the hotel piazza, and closely guarded by Frank, Jim and Bob Younger.

By this time breakfast was ready.

Somehow, the landlord had managed to scrape together a substantial meal, and there was plenty to feed the entire gang.

They went into the dining room in two sections.

Jesse was with the first lot, as was Cole Younger.

After they were through, Jesse and Cole stood guard over the treasure while the others took their turns.

"What's your plan now, Jess?" demanded Cole, after they had lighted cigars.

"To join Quantrell as soon as possible."

"That means Elk Landing."

"Right you are, if Jim Cummins is right."

"Oh, I suppose Jim knows what he's talking about."

"Undoubtedly; but, say, we'd better let the boys have a whack at the town before we start."

"I was thinking of that."

Soon those in the dining room came out.

"Boys," cried Jesse, "I'll give you an hour to pick up what you can find here."

A cheer followed the announcement.

"Leave the hotel alone," said Jesse. "That's all I ask. Frank and I will stay here and watch the bags."

With another cheer the guerrillas started on their work of destruction.

To describe the scene which followed is no part of our purpose.

It was but one of many which occurred during Quantrell's great Kansas raid.

The stores were broken open, and every man helped himself to what he wanted.

It was the same with the private houses, both on Main and the side streets.

The guerrillas here were guilty of the most dastardly outrages.

Everything of value was taken, and in many instances women and helpless children were ruthlessly shot down.

As for the men, they were shot wherever they showed themselves.

And to crown all, the torch was applied right and left.

It was Kickapoo over again.

Soon the best part of the town was in a blaze.

Cole Younger and his brothers, aided by Jim Cummins, led the marauders.

As for Jesse and Frank, they remained quietly on the hotel piazza watching the treasure.

It took all the self-denial they knew how to exert to keep them from joining with the rest, for in such cruel scenes the James Boys were in their glory.

"Say, ain't it about time a stop was put to this thing, Jesse?" said Frank at last.

"It is—more than time," replied Jesse.

And then away went Jesse dashing after the wild, half-maddened men.

It was wonderful to watch him.

He ran them together like so many sheep.

And this by mere words—there was no display of firearms.

Jesse James was a born leader of men.

Back he came to the hotel, followed by the drunken crowd.

"Rally—rally!" shouted Jesse.

"Get to your horses, boys!"

"Mount! First thing we know the Red Legs will be upon us! We must be off."

The men, with a wild shout, went crowding around into the stable yard, where the horses had been left.

"Hadn't we better load up the bags now?" questioned Frank.

"Right away," said Jesse. "What do you say to using this horse of yours, Cole?"

"He's a blame good one," said Cole.

"We want one which won't break down under the load."

"Better take him; he can run with them bags on his back where another one would bother the life out of us by keeping on the dead walk."

"All right, then; lend a hand here."

"Say, Cole," said Frank, "where's Bob? I haven't seen nothing of him."

"Look! There he comes now!" exclaimed Jesse.

A solitary horseman was dashing down Main Street between the lines of burning buildings.

It was Bob Younger.

He was minus a hat, and evidently greatly excited.

"The Red Legs—the Red Legs!" he shouted. "The Red Legs are right on top of us, Jesse James!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE GANG WIPED OUT.

"Gosh blame it all, you don't mean it!" cried Cole Younger.

Hearing Bob's startling announcement, he forgot the money for the moment, and leaped off the piazza to meet his brother as he came dashing up the steps.

"Blamed if I don't mean it!" cried Bob. "The Red Legs are coming!"

"Which way?" demanded Jesse.

"I see 'em!" cried Cole, pointing up the street.

And, indeed, they would have been seen sooner but for the dense smoke which now hung over everything.

"They are coming the other way, too!" cried Bob. "You can't retreat there."

"Who's talking about retreating?" said Jesse. "We will make a stand."

"No, we won't!" said Frank promptly. "Courage is one thing, Jess, but foolhardiness is another. We'll light out with what we have got."

Jesse said no more.

Probably his talk of a stand was mere bluff.

"Load on the bags, boys!" he cried. "I'll rally the men. Confound it all, they ought to be here now."

He ran around into the stable yard.

Here a most discouraging situation met him.

Instead of attending to the horses, the gang were gathered about a barrel of whisky which had been discovered in the barn.

They had tapped the barrel, and were helping themselves freely.

Jesse looked at all this in silent dismay.

Suddenly he raised his voice in one wild shout:

"Red Legs! Red Legs! Rally, boys! Rally, or we shall all be wiped out!"

"Gee whiz, Jess! That's so!" cried Jim Cummins.

"You'll find out whether it's so or not, you drunken snoozer!" roared Jesse. "Fly around there, now! Every man to the saddle. Quick! Quick!"

This startling announcement had the effect of half sobering the drunken crew.

Those who were still able rushed for the horses.

Jesse waited for nothing.

Hastily saddling his own horse, he did the same with Frank's, and with one for Cole.

By this time others were ready.

"Are the bags all secure?"

"All right, Jess," said Frank.

"You stand by and watch them, Frank. Don't try to do any shooting, my boy."

"Pretty hard lines, when there's goin' to be a hot fight," said Frank, "but I suppose I'll have to yield."

He leaped into the saddle, as did Cole.

"Which way shall we go?" he demanded, looking at his brother.

The words were scarcely spoken when around the corner of Cross Street a band of armed men came dashing.

"Jim Lane himself, by Godfrey!" cried Jesse.

It was, indeed, the redoubtable leader of the Red Legs, and there were fully fifty of his men behind him.

Instantly they opened fire upon the guerrillas.

"There they are, boys! Sweep 'em down!" Lane's stentorian voice was heard shouting.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

A shower of bullets flew.

"Retreat!" cried Jesse. "We can't stand up against this, but our horses should be better than theirs."

A rain of cold lead followed them.

Three of the drunken riders tumbled from their horses.

"On, on!" cried Jesse. "Courage, boys! We'll distance them yet."

But Lane's forces had been divided.

Those who had made the circuit of the burning town had concealed themselves behind a large barn not yet touched by the flames.

All at once they came swarming out and planted themselves directly in the path of the guerrillas.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Instantly they opened fire.

"Flank 'em, boys! Flank 'em!" yelled Lane.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Shots in front—shots behind—shots on both sides.

Such became the situation all in a moment.

The guerrillas fought like the demons that they were.

The Red Legs, on the contrary, were perfectly cool and collected.

With every volley a man dropped.

And although their own loss was no light one, they kept the fire right up.

"Surrender, you rebels!" yelled Lane. "Surrender, or we'll wipe you off the earth!"

"It's a gone case, Jess!" groaned Frank. "I can't stand this nohow."

Jesse gave one glance behind him.

Besides the Younger boys and Jim Cummins, there were only two men left.

"We've got to break through their ranks!" he cried. "It's the only way, boys. Follow me."

Drawing their revolvers, the guerrillas fired right and left as they dashed madly on.

Of course the fire was returned.

But the noise of the rush started the horses, and the aim of the Red Legs was all uncertain.

Several horses dropped dead, sending their riders headlong, which only served to increase the confusion.

Wildly, madly, bravely, Jesse James went dashing on.

He never stopped to look behind to see who was following.

The ranks of the Red Legs opened before him.

In vain they tried to stop him.
 It was no use.
 Frank and the pack horse were close behind him.
 But the Younger Boys and Jim Cummins had vanished.
 As for the Red Legs, they could no longer be seen.
 A dense cloud of smoke had settled over the doomed town.
 "Where are the boys, Frank?" gasped Jesse.
 "Blamed if I know, Jess."
 "Gone—all gone!"
 "It seems so."
 "By Godfrey, this is terrible!"
 "They have been simply wiped out, that's all."
 "Blamed if it don't look so."
 "It's terrible, Jess."
 "Horrible!"
 "Well, well! There's no use wasting words about it—what's done is done, and can't be undone."
 "That's what's the matter. The question is what's to be done now?"
 "Exactly. What's your idea?"
 "Of course we can't go back after the boys."
 "Well, I should rather say not."
 "Not with the money on our hands."
 "It's wonderful that we were able to get off with the money."
 "Ain't it?"
 "Our best plan is to put it through to Elk Landing and join Quantrell."
 "I suppose so. Say, is any one coming?"
 "No, it's only the smoke."
 "Thought I saw a mounted man."
 "You're right; there is one. He's coming this way lickety split!"
 "Who is it?"
 "By Godfrey!"
 "It's Cole."
 They waited in feverish impatience while Cole came dashing up.
 "Get on! Get on!" he gasped. "I'll get my wind presently. I can't talk now."
 On they flew, looking back every moment.
 But they were not followed.
 At length they struck the railroad, and here settled down to a more moderate pace.
 "Are they all gone, Cole?" asked Frank, in a dismal voice.
 "Gosh blame it all, I'm afraid so!" gasped Cole.
 "Bob and Jim?"
 "Don't say a word, Frank. This is a terrible affair."
 "I'm afraid Bob and Jim are goners," said Frank.
 "It looks so," said Jesse; "but we can't be sure."
 "As for the rest of them, they are wiped out clean," said Cole; "and it's not surprising, since they were too blaine drunk to either fight or ride."
 "We'd have done better if we'd never met Jim Cummins," said Jesse. "But there's no use talking any more about it now."
 Nor did they.
 They rode on without again alluding to their disastrous defeat. Elk Landing consisted merely of a few scattered houses on top of a bluff, at the base of which the Missouri River ran.
 As they drew near, seeing no signs of Quantrell's camp, the guerrillas halted.
 "Hello!" said Frank. "There's a man!"
 "By Godfrey, yes!" said Jesse. "Where the deuce did he spring from?"
 "Seemed as though he came up out of the ground."
 "Blamed if it didn't."
 "He's looking at us."
 "Let him look. If he knew who we are he'd moosey out of that blame quick."
 While they were speaking the man mounted, and remained standing for them to come up.
 "Why, blame it all, it's one of them two fellows we met in the train," Jesse suddenly exclaimed.
 And so they kept on discussing until they came up with the solitary horseman.
 "Good-morning, gentlemen!" he said. "Pleased to meet you again."
 "Hello!" replied Jesse. "You seem to have met us before."
 "Why, certainly; don't you remember?"
 "I thought I did."
 "I was on the train you held up."
 "I told you so," said Jesse, looking at his companions in triumph.
 "Yes," said the stranger. "I wanted to talk to you then, but you wouldn't give me a chance."
 "Wanted to speak to us?" demanded Jesse.

"Yes."
 "Who are you?"
 "Nobody in particular."
 "What's your name?"
 "Ben Braggs."
 "Do you belong to Lane's command?"
 "No; I'm not in the army. I suppose you are some of Quantrell's men?"
 "We are."
 "Then you are just the ones I want to see."
 "For what?"
 "You can tell me where I can find Quantrell."
 "Mebbe we can, and mebbe we can't. What do you want to see Quantrell for?"
 The young man's face assumed a mysterious air.
 "I have in my charge some private dispatches for Col. Quantrell," he said.
 "Dispatches from who?" demanded Jesse.
 "That I am instructed to tell to nobody but Quantrell himself."
 "Well, you can go with us, I suppose?"
 "To Quantrell's?"
 "Confound it, yes—don't you understand? We are going to Quantrell's camp ourselves."
 "Oh, all right. That will suit me exactly."
 They rode on together toward the Landing.
 "I don't like that fellow," whispered Frank to Jesse, "and I don't trust him for a cent."
 "But what can we do?"
 "Nothing!"
 "Nothing but take him to Quantrell."
 "That's all. Quantrell must decide."
 But where was Quantrell?
 When they rode into Elk Landing they found it entirely deserted.
 The stores were all closed, the houses tightly shut.
 The rode forward and looked down upon the Missouri.
 "B'gosh, there they are!" cried Cole.
 "Blamed if they ain't!"
 Underneath the bluff the steamer J. J. Sylvester lay tied up to a little wharf.
 There were a few scattered houses on the shore.
 Moving around among them were many armed men wearing the long boots and big hats which distinguished Quantrell's band. Instantly Jesse's party was seen and recognized.
 A shout of welcome went up.
 "Hello, Jess, that you?" cried a tall man, separating himself from the rest.
 "Hello, Oll Shepard!" returned Jesse. "Is the colonel there?"
 "Yes."
 "Where?"
 "On board the Sylvester."
 "Tell him I want to see him, will you?"
 "For heaven's sake," said Frank, "what are you about?"
 At the same instant a door opened on the Sylvester's deck, and Quantrell himself stalked out.
 "Great gosh, the colonel!" muttered Cole. "We've got to face the music now."
 Braggs bent forward, and eagerly scanned the features of the guerrilla leader.
 Jesse thought he trembled a little.
 For his eye was on the young man, as Quantrell thundered out: "Hello, there, on the bluff! What the deuce is all this row about?"
 Jesse saluted, as did the others.
 "Colonel, I want to see you here a moment," he called.
 "To see me, Jesse? What do you mean? I am here."
 "I'll come down if you say the word, Colonel."
 "No," said Quantrell quietly. "I'll come up."
 "By gosh, there ain't another man in the gang he'd have moved out of his tracks for," chuckled Frank.
 But Jesse only laughed.
 "Now, then, young fellow, you'll have a chance to present your dispatches," he said to Braggs, as they stood watching the guerrilla chieftain, who had left the steamer and was striding over the wharf.

CHAPTER X.

WILL HARWOOD'S BRAVE ACT.

"Well, what's wanted, Jesse James?"
 It was Quantrell who put the question.
 Jesse saluted as his commander approached.

"Colonel, we've made a big haul," he said. "I thought it best for you to know it first."

"What do you mean?"

"You see those bags?"

"Of course."

"They are filled with money."

"Money?"

"Yes."

"From where?"

"From Kickapoo and from Kirkman."

"How is it that you fellows didn't report at Kickapoo according to orders?"

"We were prevented. I want to explain."

"I'm waiting for your explanation, Jesse James. You know the rule. The man who disobeys my orders dies."

"I think you'll agree with me that we acted for the best, sir," said Jesse uneasily. "As for the rest, they yielded to me and cannot be held accountable."

"Very generous of you, but no such excuse can be accepted. However, tell your story and I will decide."

Jesse lost no time in complying.

He gave a detailed account of the events of the night.

Quantrell listened with close attention, and without comment.

While this was going on, Braggs, by Jesse's order, retired out of hearing.

Quantrell eyed him curiously, but he asked no questions until Jesse ceased to speak.

"It's all right as far as you are concerned," he then said; "but this defeat at Kirkman is a bad affair."

"I know it. I feel it more than I can tell."

"Well, it can't be helped. How much does the money amount to?"

"A great deal; as much as sixty or seventy thousand dollars, but we haven't counted it, and it may amount to a great deal more."

"It must be taken on board the steamer at once. Attend to it. Tell the boys nothing, if they ask; I'll attend to that."

"Very good, sir. It shall be done. Now I want to speak about another matter."

"Well?"

"You see that young man; we met him on the road, and——"

"Stay! I know the young man. He told you he had dispatches for me?"

"Yes."

"That is correct; go on down the bluff. I'll stay and talk with him here."

This put altogether a new face on the affair.

Not a little surprised, Jesse hurried off with the horses, accompanied by Frank and Cole.

Meanwhile, Quantrell walked over to Braggs and shook hands.

"Well, you back again?" he said.

"Yes, Colonel."

"You have brought the letters I asked for to prove what you say?"

"Yes, Colonel. Here they are."

The packet was then produced.

Quantrell tore it open and hastily perused the letters it contained.

"This is all right," he said. "We shall move on Atehison to-night. For what you have done I thank you. For your pay you must look to your friends."

"They will attend to that, sir."

"Very good. When do you return?"

"I would like to go with you."

No more was said.

Braggs accompanied Quantrell on board the steamer.

By this time Jesse and the others had the bags on board.

They stood beside them on the main deck, waiting for Quantrell's orders.

"Well, you've got 'em here, all right, have you, Jess?" said the guerrilla chief familiarly.

"Yes, Colonel. Where shall we take them?"

"To the captain's stateroom on deck."

"Where are the people?"

Quantrell gave one of his fiendish smiles.

"We'll have to ask the fishes," he replied.

"All dead?"

"Dead, and in the river."

"And the officers and crew of the steamer?"

"With them, all but the captain and the engineer. We thought we might need their services so we kept them alive. They are prisoners in the hold."

"A clean sweep, Colonel."

"We make no other kind. Hustle around, now, and get the money upstairs; we'll count it together. If there is much as you think it will put us in fine shape. By Jove, where's that boy?"

He looked around for Braggs.

But the young dispatch bearer had disappeared.

"I don't understand this," muttered Quantrell. "Where in thunder can he have gone?"

He understood less as time went on.

That the young man had followed him on board he knew to a certainty.

But the most persistent search through the steamer and on shore failed to reveal his whereabouts.

He had simply vanished.

And his disappearance made Quantrell a very uneasy man.

Quantrell strode to his stateroom, where Jesse and Frank were. They had been counting up the money, and were ready with their report.

"Well, how much do you make it?" asked the guerrilla, walking up to the little table upon which the gold and bills lay spread out.

"There's over eighty thousand dollars," said Jesse.

"How much in gold?"

"Ten thousand three hundred."

"It's all we can count on. What's those papers?"

"Deeds of property and mortgages; there's a few drafts, also, and a raft of notes."

"Not worth a continental."

"I suppose not."

"All right; you've done a big thing. Now, then, for the next move. Boys, we shall raid Atchison to-night."

"Atchison!" cried Jesse.

"Yes, Atchison."

"But——"

"Now, hold on! I know what I am about."

"But we can never take the town."

"Oh, but we can; more than a hundred men will join us the moment we enter."

"That's different, if——"

"If I know what I am talking about, you want to say. Spit it right out."

"Oh, I don't mean that."

"Enough! Hustle that stuff into the bags, and stow 'em away under the bunks."

"Do you mean to abandon the steamer?"

"Of course. I have no use for it. I—heavens! What's that?"

A shot suddenly rang out.

Quantrell sprang up and started to open the stateroom door.

"It's the Red Legs! That's the signal!" he exclaimed. "The Red Legs are upon us!"

His hand was upon the door, but before he could turn the knob it was suddenly flung open.

There stood a young man with a cocked revolver in each hand.

"Hands up!" he breathed. "Hands up, or you die!"

"Heavens! It's the Harwood boy!" gasped Jesse.

But his hands went up.

So did Frank's.

So did Quantrell's.

"That's the talk!" chuckled the intruder. "Gentlemen, I rather think I've got the drop on you!"

Crack!

Once more a shot rang out from the top of the bluff.

"Great grindstones!" cried George Shepard. "Where is Quantrell? The Red Legs are upon us for sure."

It was the signal of the guards, who were posted at the upper window of one of the houses on the bluff.

George, who was in command on shore during Quantrell's absence, immediately discharged his revolver.

He expected to see Quantrell appear on the steamer's deck.

But he did not.

The stateroom was on the side toward the river.

Consequently the guerrillas could not see what was going on.

Get on board, there, Cole Younger, and see what the deuce is the reason they don't come," cried Shepard.

Leaving Cole to act, he gave the rallying cry.

Every man flew to arms.

The horses were hustled about and saddled.

Just then the guard appeared on top of the bluff.

"Hurry! Hurry, for heaven's sake!" he shouted. "The Red Legs are upon us! If you fellows are caught down there you are as good as dead!"

"Where is he? Why the deuce don't he come?" cried Shepard, turning toward the wharf.

To his amazement, he saw that the steamer was ten feet out in the river.

At the same instant the big stern wheel began to move.

Cole Younger had vanished.

There was no one to be seen on deck, but in the wheel-house stood Quantrell and another man.

The guerrilla chief neither moved nor spoke when Shepard shouted:

"Colonel! Colonel!"

"What in thunder does it mean? Is Quantrell going to desert us?" cried Oll Shepard.

George ran down upon the wharf, shouting.

Still Quantrell stood there motionless and silent.

The steamer swung out into the stream and started up the river.

What course the guerrillas might have taken under any other circumstances it is hard to say.

But they were given no time to think.

"Come up here, or you're lost!" roared the guard. "If Quantrell has skipped out and left us, we've got to think of ourselves!"

They swarmed up on top of the bluff then.

Not a moment too soon, either.

Taking advantage of a strip of cottonwoods skirting a small creek which here emptied into the Missouri, Lane and his Red Legs had managed to approach very near to the landing without discovery.

Now they came dashing down full force.

What was to be done?

With no one but George Shepard to lead them, Quantrell's men found themselves in a sorry fix.

For Shepard was a thick-headed, clumsy fellow, although as brave as any man in the band.

"We've got to make a stand, boys!" he shouted. "I don't believe Quantrell has deserted. There's something wrong with all this."

"Look! Look!" cried Oll, pointing to the steamer.

A young man had suddenly appeared on the upper deck.

The distance was too great for the guerrillas to see his face.

He took a red handkerchief from his pocket and waved it three times.

"Blast it all, it's the Braggs boy!" cried George.

"He's signaling," said Oll.

"Am I blind that I can't see?"

"Look! Look! They're answering him!"

It was so.

One of the foremost of the riders suddenly took off his hat and waved back.

"Draw up in line!" roared George. "Give it them! Now!"

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Instantly the guerrillas opened fire.

The battle on the bluffs had begun.

The shots were promptly returned by the Red Legs.

But their advance was not checked by the shower of cold lead which went flying toward them.

Several fell from their horses.

Two of the guerrillas dropped.

Another volley and still another.

"Sweep 'em down, boys—sweep 'em down!" General Jim Lane shouted, for the famous Red Leg was in the lead.

For the guerrillas to stand up against this charge was impossible.

Without their leader, and outnumbered two to one, they stood no sort of show.

For a few moments they held their ground; then the line broke.

They scattered in every direction, according to their usual custom.

George Shepard gave Quantrell's whistle—the signal which meant, "Retreat north."

Firing back as they flew, they dashed away, bringing down many a Red Leg, but leaving but few of their own men on the field.

They were far better mounted than the Red Legs.

Soon the last of their number had passed out of range.

They were followed, however.

Rallying his forces, Lane led them up the river.

He seemed less chagrined at the partial failure of his attack than might have been expected.

In fact, his whole attention appeared to be concentrated on the steamer, which was fast disappearing in the distance.

Now it could be seen, now it was lost to view around one of the many bends in the river.

Again it would suddenly become visible, and then in a moment disappear.

Lane kept his eyes steadily fixed upon it.

Occasionally he would use a glass, and then, after a hasty look, lower it again.

Not a word did he say as to his motive for all this, but led his force on at moderate speed. Of course this aroused some curiosity.

But Lane was not the man to explain his motives.

At last they came to a point where the bluff rose to a considerable height.

They could look down upon the river and see its full sweep for miles ahead.

Up went the glass again.

At the same instant two men ran out of the pilot-house of the Sylvester and waved the red signal.

Instantly a gun was discharged on shore.

The shot did not come from the guerrillas.

They could be distantly seen dashing madly on about half a mile ahead.

The signal was well in advance of that.

Evidently it disturbed the guerrillas.

They halted.

"On, boys, on!" shouted Lane. "We've got them now; they are between two fires."

The horses were spurred on, and the speed of the Red Legs were redoubled for about ten minutes.

The steamer had now turned in toward the shore, when all at once a puff of steam was seen to rise.

It went right up alongside the smokestack.

A straight tongue of flame shot up fully twenty feet.

"Great heavens! The Sylvester has exploded her boiler!" gasped Lane.

But as yet no sound had reached their ears.

Then in a moment it came.

A dull report, echoed by the bluffs.

At the same instant the Sylvester's smokestack toppled and fell.

Up from the steamer's waist there was a rush of flame.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FATE OF THE SYLVESTER.

Probably Quantrell and the James Boys would not have yielded so tamely to Will Harwood alone.

When they flung up their hands in the stateroom it was because they saw behind Will three men.

One was the captain of the Sylvester.

Another was the engineer.

The third was the fireman, who had managed to conceal himself when the steamer was captured.

Each of these men carried a revolver; therefore it was not surprising that the guerrillas yielded as they did.

"What the blazes! Do you mean to kill us?" gasped Quantrell, who was the first to speak.

But no attention was paid to his remark.

Boy though he was, Will Harwood's companions seemed to acknowledge his leadership.

"Quick, fireman, cut the cables!" the young scout ordered.

"Engineer, attend to your duty. Captain Cole and I will see to matters here."

The two addressed vanished like a flash.

"Disarm them, Captain!" cried Will.

And then to the prisoners:

"Look out for yourselves, you three! The first movement of your hands and I fire. I shall not miss my aim."

There was no attempt at resistance.

What followed only goes to show how much one determined spirit can accomplish.

Captain Cole, without speaking, went to work.

Evidently he was prepared for the emergency.

In an incredibly short time he had disarmed the three guerrillas and secured them with stout ropes which he had provided for the purpose.

Quantrell's arms were bound behind his back.

Jesse and Frank were tied hand and foot, and in addition, tied to the middle bunk.

Not a word was spoken on either side until this was done.

"All right," cried Will. "This settles 'em! Take your man to the wheel-house, Captain. Let them think that he has deserted them, as we arranged."

It was a shrewd move.

How it confused the guerrillas we already know.

In a moment Captain Cole was at the wheel, with Quantrell so placed that the guerrillas on shore could see him.

The bell rang in the engine room, and the Sylvester, which had already drifted away from the wharf, swung around and started up the stream.

By this time the firing had become pretty lively, for the battle on the bluff had begun.

Will left the stateroom, and running around on the other side of the steamer, waved his handkerchief as has been described

The signal was promptly returned by Lane.

Clearly these two understood each other.

Will returned to the stateroom, well satisfied with the result of his bold move.

He found the prisoners as he had left them, and in no very pleasant frame of mind.

Jesse was disposed to talk, however, and assumed a friendly tone.

"Well, by Godfrey, I admire you, young feller," he said, as Will entered; "gosh blame me if I don't."

It is hardly to be wondered that the boy felt flattered.

He laughed, and seizing one of the bags began to tumble the money in.

"You are the fellow who gave us the slip at the creek last night, ain't you?" demanded Jesse, still scarcely able to assure himself of this fact.

"I am."

"Can't we make some bargain? I know Quantrell will agree to anything."

"Nonsense!"

"Not at all. Suppose we give up half this money, and put you and your friends ashore?"

"Don't talk rubbish; it's a mere waste of time," replied Will.

And after that he would not answer, although Jesse pressed him hard.

Filling three bags, he carried them from the stateroom one by one.

"You'd better think over my offer!" called Jesse, as he went out with the last bag.

But Will slammed the door, and left them without making any reply.

Carrying the bag to the wheel-house, where he had put the others, he took his place beside Captain Cole, who was silently attending to his duty.

Quantrell stood by with his hands tied behind him, looking very much depressed.

"Well, are you all through, young man?" demanded the captain, as Will closed the pilot-house door.

"All through, Cap."

"That's the last of the money?"

"That's the last."

"It's amazing. I wouldn't have believed it. Your plan worked like a charm."

"I told you it would."

"What's to be done now? Boy, I am ready for you to boss me right to the end of the chapter. You've only got to say the word."

"We'll run up to Eagle Point. The Red Legs are stationed there."

"Yes; but, look here, I suppose you know we can't make a landing at Eagle Point?"

"Can't we?"

"No; it's entirely too shallow."

"Then you'll have to anchor and we'll take to the boats."

"That's what we'll have to do."

"Hadn't I better get them ready?"

"I think you had. Get the fireman to help you. Tell him to make sure that the davit ropes are all clear."

Will hurried away.

Descending into the engine room, he called the fireman, and together they prepared two of the stern boats so that they could be launched at any moment.

It then occurred to Will that the bags had better be put into one of the boats, and he did so.

By this time they had neared the point.

The moment for leaving the steamer was at hand, and Will determined to have a look at his prisoners.

He hurried around to the stateroom, where he had left Jesse and Frank.

When he thrust the key into the lock, he was startled to find the door unfastened.

He flung it back.

An exclamation of disgust escaped him.

The stateroom was deserted.

"Great heavens, where are they?" he gasped.

The ropes lying upon the floor offered the only explanation to the mystery.

Hastily Will examined them.

They had been cut through with a sharp knife.

Will glided cautiously along the deck toward the wheel-house.

He could see the captain distinctly.

Quantrell still stood beside him.

The steamer was now turning in toward the point.

"Thank heaven, I am in time!" murmured Will.

He flung open the door of the wheel-house.

Too late he realized his danger.

The instant he appeared three men leaped up from the floor of the wheel-house and sprang upon him.

He had just time to recognize Jesse, Frank and Cole Younger.

"Kill him! Kill him!" hissed the former.

Biff!

Whack!

Thud!

Will dropped like a stone.

The clenched fists of Jesse and Frank did the business.

Nor could Captain Cole interfere.

For Quantrell, no longer a prisoner, held the captain covered with a cocked revolver.

Thus suddenly had the tables been turned on board the Sylvester.

Just then Captain Cole scarcely expected to escape with his life.

"Good enough! That settles him!" exclaimed Quantrell. "Is he dead?"

"Blamed if I know, but I shouldn't wonder!" growled Cole Younger, giving Will a brutal kick.

"Disarm him."

"All right, Colonel."

"The engineer and fireman must be looked to now."

"We'll attend to them," said Jesse.

"It's a lucky turn for us," continued Quantrell. "Cole Younger, I shall never forget this of you."

"I did the best I could," said Cole modestly.

"You did the best thing possible; but how came you to think of it?"

"Why, Colonel, when I saw you up there in the wheel-house never answering George Shepard's call, I knowed there must be something wrong."

"You were shrewd."

"So I just climbed aboard and hid till I caught on to the situation; then I sneaked into the stateroom, and set Jesse and Frank free."

"Say," interrupted Jesse, "we're wasting time with all this talk."

"Then why ain't you off attending to those fellows in the engine room?" exclaimed Quantrell.

"I want to say something."

"Say it."

"Have you looked over there back of those hummocks on the bluff?"

Quantrell turned in the direction which Jesse pointed.

"By thunder, I see what you mean," he exclaimed.

The guerrillas could be distinctly seen dashing along the bluff toward an ambush of Red Legs.

"We must warn Shepard!" exclaimed Quantrell. "Give him the danger signal, Jesse, and then fly to the engine room; there's not a moment to be lost."

Jesse and Frank hurriedly left the wheel-house.

Drawing a red handkerchief from his pocket Jesse waved it toward the shore.

The signal had an effect for which they were hardly prepared.

Instantly a gun was fired from behind the hummocks.

At the same moment the guerrillas halted.

"Did you hear that?" cried Jesse. "Those blame Red Legs expected that signal."

"Never mind; it has done the business," replied Quantrell. "Make for the engine room, and attend to your men."

Cole Younger, with Jesse and Frank, now hurried below.

Quantrell turned to Captain Cole.

"Have you a glass?" he asked.

"Yes, there's one in that locker."

Quantrell opened the locker, and taking out the glass adjusted it to his eye, and began to scan the situation on shore.

He could distinctly see all three parties.

The men behind the hummocks remained motionless.

The guerrillas were moving cautiously down to the edge of the bluff.

In the distance, the Red Legs, under Lane, were advancing at full speed.

"Pull in toward the shore!" ordered Quantrell.

Quantrell's word were drowned by a tremendous explosion.

There was a burst of steam amidships, and the Sylvester trembled from stem to stern.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BURNING OF THE SYLVESTER.

"Merciful heavens! What has happened?" gasped Quantrell, clutching at the woodwork of the wheel-house for support.

"The boiler has burst—that's what!" cried Captain Cole. "It's all over with us now."

And, indeed, it looked very much that way.

Following the steam, flames came shooting up amidships.

The steamer seemed to be settling aft.

"Run her nose into the shallows, Cap," cried Quantrell, running from the wheel-house. "Quick! For the love of heaven, he quick!"

Out he dashed, tumbling against Jesse and Frank.

"Godfrey! We don't know!" replied Jesse.

"The engineer—the fireman—where are they?"

"Prisoners in the engine room."

"Did you shut off steam or meddle with the engine in any way?"

"No—that is——"

"Out with it."

"Well, when we jumped in on them, the engineer told us there would be trouble if we didn't let him alone."

"And you refused to let him handle the engine as he wished before you tied him up?"

"Yes."

"This is the result; Jesse, I didn't think you were such a fool. Where's Cole Younger?"

"He went up ahead; don't know where he is."

"By thunder, there he comes!" cried Frank.

Cole was seen dashing forward, running the gantlet of the flames.

"Are you all mad that you stand here!" he cried. "Don't you see what has happened? Do you forget the money?"

"I forget nothing," replied Quantrell. "The steamer will be on the sand bank in an instant."

"But the boat?"

"We can't reach it if we try; we must think of our lives first of all."

"How is it, Cap? Can you make the bank before she busts?" called Quantrell, looking around at the wheel-house.

To his amazement he saw no one at the wheel.

"He's gone!" he cried. "By heaven, he's given us the slip."

"And the steamer's swinging around," said Frank. "Oh, we'll make the sand bank in a pig's rib."

With a fierce imprecation, Quantrell sprang to the pilot-house.

The door was closed, as he had left it, but the interior was deserted.

Even Will Harwood's body had vanished.

And yet without passing the guerrillas there seemed no possible way by which the captain could have escaped.

"I'll give it up, boys," he cried. "We'll make a dash for the boat."

"'Bout time!" growled Cole. "Now, then, hold your breath, and let her go!"

Followed by Quantrell and the James Boys, Cole Younger dashed aft in among the flames.

Now, had Quantrell looked behind him a moment sooner he would have been in time to prevent the mysterious disappearance of Captain Cole.

When the guerrilla chief left the pilot-house, the captain of the *Sylvester* had no other thought than to run the steamer upon the sand bank.

But he was boiling over with rage, and thirsting for revenge against the fiends, who, after murdering his crew, had now, by their stupidity, destroyed the craft of which he was half owner.

Still at that moment Captain Cole meant to carry out the order—probably would have done so had not Will Harwood suddenly opened his eyes and raised his head.

"Great heavens! Do you still live, boy?" breathed the captain, looking down.

"What's the matter? Where are they?" murmured Will.

"Hush!" whispered the captain. "If you still live, this puts altogether another face on the affair. You saved my life, young fellow, and I'll save you now, if it takes a leg."

He gave the wheel a twist or two, and looked around warily.

Then Will saw the captain stoop down, and push away a big chest that stood alongside the wheel.

Beneath the chest was a small trap door.

This the captain opened, and peered down.

"It is all right," he said. "The ladder is in place. Boy, can you crawl down there?"

"I reckon I can."

Will pulled his wits together with a desperate effort.

He lowered himself through the trap, and crawled down the ladder into the darkness.

He could hear the captain following.

Before leaving the pilot-house, the master of the *Sylvester* managed to work the chest over the hole and against the upright door of the trap.

It was this that deceived Quantrell.

In his haste he made no close examination, and the result was he never discovered the trick.

"Look out for yourself!" called Captain Cole, as he descended after Will. "Stop when you get to the platform."

"I'm there now," came the answer through the darkness.

"Very good. Stand perfectly still. I'll be with you in a moment."

Will, who had moved away from the ladder a foot or two, remained motionless.

Suddenly a match flashed, and Captain Cole stood beside him.

He hastily lighted a lantern which hung down from a beam above their heads.

"We are all right, young fellow," he said encouragingly. "Keep cool."

"Don't fear for me," replied Will; "but what has happened? How did the steamer catch fire?"

"Those fools let the boiler burst—that's what!"

"And the engineer and fireman?"

"Are dead. I'm afraid."

"We must be sure—we must try to save them."

"There you go again, always thinking of somebody else besides yourself, but it's no use. We can do nothing for them, and there ain't one chance in a thousand that they are still alive."

All this time Captain Cole was working at a small boat, which lay upon the planks close by.

"I have been prepared for some such thing as this ever since the war broke out," he said. "Here's our way of escape, and we must take it without an instant's delay."

He pressed a spring, and threw open a small door in the steamer's side, about four feet up from the water line.

"We'll drop the boat out here," he said. "As to what is to happen afterwards, it all depends upon ourselves."

"They've disarmed me," said Will. "If it wasn't for that——"

"Oh, there are arms enough in the boat. See, here's a brace of revolvers and a rifle. Help yourself."

Will seized one of the revolvers, and they then proceeded to push the boat through the opening.

As it was fast to two ropes working on blocks above, it remained in position, and they dropped into it.

Captain Cole hastily cast off, and unshipping the oars, pulled away from the burning steamer.

"Keep an eye aft," he said. "Shoot the first one of them who shows his nose."

It was a startling sight which revealed itself as they pulled away.

Amidships the *Sylvester* was now a mass of flames.

But no sign of the guerrillas could be seen on board.

"She can't last long."

"No; her hog-frame is all afire; it will burn through in a minute, and then she will break in two."

"There they are! There they are!"

It was so.

The stern of the burning steamer had now swung around so as to reveal the other side.

Backed by the flames they saw Quantrell, the James Boys and Cole Younger.

They seemed to be having trouble with the boat.

Jesse was sawing away at one rope with what appeared to be a very dull knife.

"Heavens! They are all balled up!" chuckled the captain.

"They can't hold that position long."

"They see us!" cried Will.

At the same instant Quantrell and Frank each sent a shot flying at the boat.

But they had only their revolvers, and the shots struck the water several yards astern.

"We're safe," chuckled the captain. "We can stay right here and see the fun out."

"It won't be long," murmured Will.

Nor was it.

The hog-frame had parted on both sides at once, apparently.

With incredible rapidity the *Sylvester* settled into the river.

In a moment all was over.

Not a vestige of the steamer could be seen save the blackened wreckage which strewed the water on all sides.

But the boat was there.

Two men were in her, a third was clinging to the gunwale. The watchers saw him drawn in, and looked eagerly around for the fourth.

He was nowhere visible.

"Which is it? Can you make out?" breathed Captain Cole.

"No! I can't tell one from the other at this distance," replied Will.

"See them look."

"I see they can't make it out any more than we can."

"One is drowned—that's certain. They've given it up now and are rowing off for the shore."

They watched the movements of the other boat in silence for a few moments.

No attention was paid to them.

Heading for the point on the bluff where the guerrillas were gathered, the men in the boat pulled toward the shore.

"Let them go," said Captain Cole sadly, and may my curse go with them. They have cost me the old Sylvester, as good a boat as ever floated on the Missouri. Bad luck attend them! Let them go!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAPTURE OF QUANTRELL.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

On top of the bluffs the firing had begun.

Of course, it is not to be supposed that General Jim Lane remained idle while all the happenings of the last chapter were transpiring.

He bore down on the guerrillas full force.

His coming was seen, and Quantrell's men prepared to defend themselves.

George Shepard was not the man to disobey the orders of his chief.

The signal given by Jesse from the deck of the steamer meant: "There is danger ahead; stop and fight!"

This Shepard prepared to do.

Nor was he any the less inclined to leave when he saw the boat making for the shore.

The guerrillas drew themselves up in line, and the firing was instantly returned.

With a wild shout the ambushed men came dashing in the rear, while Lane, seeing his opportunity, led the charge in front.

This occurred just as the boat went creeping in under the bluff.

Then it was a hand-to-hand combat, and a terrible one.

Seeing that the battle had begun, Captain Cole abandoned his intention of pulling ashore.

"We'll keep out of that mess, young man," he said. "Let's pull over to the wreckage. Perhaps we may strike something, who knows?"

In a moment they were among it.

It was a dreary sight to watch the odds and ends from the wrecked steamer go floating past.

"Look! Look!" cried Will suddenly.

He pointed off to the left.

"It's a man!" exclaimed Captain Cole.

"Sure!"

"Can it be the engineer?"

"No; I'm sure not."

"What's he got hold of?"

"Looks like a chicken coop."

"He's alive, and we must do our best to rescue him."

"Help! Help!" he shouted. "I'm pretty well used up. Help me, for God's sake!"

"Why, it's Quantrell! That's who it is," cried Will.

"Sure as you're born!" cried the captain, slackening speed.

"Go on! Go on!" cried Will.

"Not if I know it. Let him drown, the bloody murderer! Let him drown."

"No, no!" cried Will. "We must save him!"

Quantrell, seeing them coming, ceased to shout.

In a moment they were alongside the chicken coop.

Will stretched out a hand and helped the guerrilla chief into the boat.

"So it's you, is it?" Quantrell growled. "By thunder, it's tough to have to owe my life to you two."

"Perhaps you'd rather we'd put you overboard again," said Will dryly.

"No; now that I'm here, I'll stay here."

Will had passed his oar to Captain Cole and drawn his revolver.

"You'll hand over your weapons," he said quietly. "You'd better empty your pockets while you're about it. You may have something else about you that I want."

Quantrell sulkily complied.

"Where are the others?" he growled.

"Do you mean your friends?" asked Will.

"Of course."

"They are just making a landing over there—can't you see them?"

"Curse them!"

"Did they desert you?"

"They took no trouble to look for me, or I shouldn't be here now."

"How did it happen?"

"How did what happen?"

"Pshaw! As though you didn't understand! How was it that you didn't get into the boat?"

"I got a rap on the leg somehow as I fell, and sank. When I came up I couldn't see anything of them, and just grabbed the first thing that came handy—that's all."

In the meantime, the battle between Gen. Lane and the guerrillas continued.

"There they go! By Jove, the guerrillas have got the worst of it!" cried Captain Cole.

The guerrillas were now in full retreat, followed by the Red Legs.

It was very important that Will should communicate with Gen. Lane, and he immediately began signaling the shore.

But no attention was paid to him.

"Finally Captain Cole said:

"Do you think General Lane will return to the bluff?"

"I think so. He knew I was with Quantrell, and from some of the prisoners he will no doubt learn that we were on board the steamer."

"That's what I was thinking. Now, I know a cave over on the shore under the bluffs. What do you say to putting your prisoner there while we go on the hunt for Lane?"

"Where is your cave?"

"A little further up."

Nothing could now be seen of the other boat, but as they drew near the point for which the captain was heading they discovered it in among the bushes at the head of a little cove.

They came upon it suddenly, just as they were about to make the landing.

For a moment it threw them into a high state of excitement.

But the boat was empty.

"They have left their boat and gone on the bluff," declared Captain Cole.

"It looks like it," replied Will. "At any rate, the bags are gone."

"Shall we land?"

"How far is your cave?"

"Only a short distance down the shore."

"All right; let's try it."

"I was going to leave the boat here, but it won't do now, I suppose?"

"It would be a dead give away in case they came back."

"It's just as bad down by the cave, for it's all open there."

"We'd better leave it here, then. Perhaps we can manage to hide it among the bushes so that they won't find it unless they take to prying around."

This was done, and a few moments later the little party found themselves standing on the narrow strip of shore under the bluff. Captain Cole now led the way down the river for a distance of a quarter of a mile or so.

A low whistle from the captain presently announced that he had discovered the cave, and Will hurried Quantrell up the slope to the spot.

"Here it is! Snug as ever!" said the captain. "You can leave your prisoner here a month if you want to, and no one will be the wiser."

It was, indeed, a snug retreat.

The cave was about twenty feet in width, and seemed to extend a long distance in under the bluffs through the limestone rock.

With sinking heart, the guerrilla chief was led into the recesses of the cave.

Soon it began to narrow, and the light grew faint.

"This is far enough, I should say," said Will, stopping.

"If you are satisfied, I am," replied Captain Cole; "but we must secure him somehow."

"We'll tie his legs together, and just let him lie here; that's the surest way."

They went to work at once.

Captain Cole had plenty of strong cord with him.

Will was stooping down, tying the knots, and the captain stood watching him when three dark shadows suddenly appeared around a projection in the rocky wall on their left.

For a moment they remained motionless, and then appeared to glide forward, and three rough-looking fellows came into view.

One held up his finger warningly, and pointed to Will.

Suddenly they made a rush, coming down upon the captain and Will like a cyclone.

Biff!

Whack!

Thud!

"We've got 'em!" cried the man who had held up his finger as the two fell sprawling. "We've got 'em, boys, for fair!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TABLES TURNED ALL AROUND.

"Tie 'em up! That's the talk, Bob! Make the knots gosh blame tight!"

The speaker, one of the three men who had so suddenly pounced upon Will and Captain Cole, turned to look at the prisoner, whose face was scarcely visible in the dim light.

"Great guns! Why, it's Colonel Quantrell!" he exclaimed. "If it ain't, blame me! What in thunder does this mean?"

Now, to find out what it meant, the proper way would seem to be to untie Quantrell, take out the gag and let him speak for himself.

This was done on the instant.

Quantrell staggered to his feet.

"Heavens! Is it you, Jim Cummins?" he gasped.

The rescuer gave a chuckling laugh.

"It ain't anybody else, Colonel," he replied.

"And you, Jim Younger, and Bob, too?"

"That's what's the matter!" cried Bob, who had just finished tying the prisoners.

"Heavens, boys! I can't help thinking what a lucky thing it was for me that you three happened to be here in this cave."

"It's nothing but accident," said Bob. "We crawled in here to have a sleep."

"But where are you from?"

"Kirkman last."

"From what Jesse told me I thought all three of you lay dead in Kirkman."

"Not much! By gosh, Colonel, I'm glad to hear you speak of Jess. Then he's alive?"

"Very much alive, last I saw of him."

"And Frank and Cole?"

"Both O. K. How did you manage to escape?"

"Blamed if I know. We had a deuce of a job to do it, but here we are! How is it with you, Colonel? What in thunder brings you here?"

Then, somewhat to Quantrell's surprise, he found that the three guerrillas knew nothing at all of what had happened.

The story of the burning steamer and the fight on the bluff was all news to them.

Of course Quantrell's narration created some excitement.

"What do you propose to do with the prisoners?"

"Kill them!" hissed Quantrell fiercely. "As for that boy, no death I can bring upon him will half satisfy me, and the steamer captain must die, too."

"Why not do it now?"

"No, no! We'll find the boys first."

Just as they were about to pass out, the entrance was suddenly darkened, and three men sprang in.

Blinded as they were by the sunlight, they were just able to perceive the advancing party.

Instantly they drew revolvers.

"Halt there!" shouted one. "Who the deuce are you? Move one inch and you are a dead man!"

"What!" cried Quantrell. "Would you shoot me, Jesse James?"

"Colonel! You!"

"No one else!"

"Bob—Jim! By thunder, is it you?" cried Cole Younger, rushing forward with a joyful shout.

They were the three missing ones, and no one else.

Of course there was great joy over the meeting, and a great deal of congratulation all around.

But Quantrell said little.

He stood one side, and seemed not disposed to talk, until he said at last:

"Where are the bags, Jesse James?"

"Here."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say."

"Do you mean to say the bags are in this cave?"

"They are. We put 'em here and went up on the bluff to see how the land lay."

"Blame funny we didn't hear you," said Jim Cummins.

"You must have been snoozing sounder than the seven sleepers, for I'm sure we made enough noise."

"Well!" exclaimed Quantrell. "Matters have taken a very much more satisfactory turn than I would have supposed possible a while ago. Whereabouts in the cave are the bags, Jesse?"

"Right over here in a hole in the wall."

"You know the cave, it seems?"

"Not much!"

"Then how——"

"Oh, we found it out by mere accident. Shall we get out the bags?"

"Yes."

Jesse and Frank hurried to obey.

"Want any help?" asked Cole, who was busy talking to his brothers.

"No," called Jesse. "We can manage it alone."

They disappeared around the turn in the rocks in an instant.

Quantrell began speaking with Jim Cummins about some private matters when all at once there was a loud shout, and back came Jesse and Frank in a great flutter.

"By Godfrey, the bags are gone!" roared Jesse.

"Gone!" gasped Quantrell, looking suspiciously at Jim Cummins and the Youngers.

"Yes, gone. We can't find hide nor hair of 'em!"

"Strange!"

"Blame strange."

"Sure you remember where you put them?"

"Well, rather. We ain't likely to make no mistake on that score."

For a moment there was a dead silence.

They hurried to the spot.

Jesse pointed to a deep crevice in the rock.

"'Twas there, Colonel."

"Strange!"

"You said that before."

"And I repeat it, but I am not talking about the bags now."

"What?"

"Look, Cole!"

Quantrell pointed to the spot where they had left Will Harwood and the Captain gagged and bound hand and foot.

"Gone!" gasped Cole.

"You see!"

"This is serious."

"More than serious. We are not alone in this cave."

For a moment they stood in silent dismay.

"Is there no way of making a light?"

"We might find some dry wood outside," suggested Cole.

"Go and get it. We'll build a big fire, and that will throw its light in through the cave for a long distance."

"We'd better all go, hadn't we?"

"No. I'll stay here with Jim Cummins. Some one ought to watch."

As this was certainly reasonable enough, no objections were offered.

The James Boys and the Youngers hurried out of the cave.

It was not an easy matter to find wood which was thoroughly dry, but at length they managed to scrape together enough to answer their purpose.

They were just starting on their return when suddenly a shot rang out inside the cave.

It was followed by another and then another.

Then all was still.

"Heavens! What's that?" exclaimed Frank.

"Quantrell's caught somebody!" cried Jesse.

"Or somebody has caught Quantrell!" echoed Cole.

"Come on, boys! We must know what this means!"

Jesse, Frank and Cole drew their revolvers, but Jim was unarmed.

Together they went dashing back into the cave.

But it was only to find it silent and deserted.

Like the bags and the prisoners, Quantrell, with Jim Cummins and Bob Younger, had disappeared.

CHAPTER XV.

WILL HARWOOD FULFILLS HIS TRUST.

What had happened in the cave during the brief absence of Jesse James and his companions?

This must now be explained.

It began with the coming of the James Boys.

When Quantrell and the others left them Will Harwood's heart sank in despair.

It looked very much as if there was no help for Captain Cole and himself.

In vain the brave fellow struggled with his bonds.

It was a useless effort, for he could not loosen the knots even ever so little.

Nor could he communicate with Captain Cole on account of the gag.

It was just then, when everything seemed the blackest, that Will's sharp ears caught the sound of a light footstep.

He listened.

The sound seemed to come from behind him.

Nearer and nearer it approached.

Then all at once a soft hand was laid upon his forehead, and a voice whispered:

"Don't make the slightest sound. I have come to save you! In a moment I will set you free!"

Blessed relief!

Will's heart gave a wild bound as he saw bending over him the girl who had come to his assistance after the affair of the train.

She drew the handkerchief from his mouth, and quickly cut the cords which bound him.

Will sprang to his feet, and would have spoken, but the girl held up a warning finger.

"Not a word!" she whispered. "They will be back again. Save your friend, and follow me."

This was enough.

Will seized the knife which she extended toward him, and went to the assistance of Captain Cole.

"Great guns, this is a relief!" gasped the captain, as he staggered to his feet. "Who have we here?"

"Hush! Hush!" breathed the girl. "I know all. I know more than you know. There were others here before you came. They left behind them three large bags."

"The money!" exclaimed Will in a whisper.

The girl led the way to the crevice in the rock where the three bags had been hidden.

The girl then led the way to the crevice in the rock where the three bags had been hidden.

There they were, only waiting to be taken out.

The feeling of triumph which Will Harwood experienced as he drew them from their concealment can scarcely be described.

Captain Cole was in a high state of excitement.

It was all they could do to keep him quiet.

But not until they were safe from any chance of being overheard was he permitted to speak.

The place to which the girl had led them was a small chamber opening off from the main cave on the left of the entrance, which was concealed by a pile of broken rock.

Over this they climbed, and found themselves in a snug retreat.

A dark lantern which the girl now produced gave them all the light they required.

"You can speak now," she said. "Should they come back they cannot hear us. At last we are safe."

"Well, what I want to say is that I'm most everlastingly obliged to you, young woman," exclaimed the captain. "If it is all the same to you, I'd like to know who I have to thank?"

"Excuse me," said Will, "for not introducing you. This is Miss Etta Rivers, Captain. Miss Rivers, Captain Cole."

The captain shook hands with true Western warmth.

"What! Are you Etta Rivers, the girl scout!" he exclaimed.

"Well, I guess I'm right glad to meet you! I have heard all about your doings, young lady, many a time."

Etta took it very coolly.

"I suppose, Miss, you know just what you are about—tell us what to do."

"You are to join Lane at Bristol."

"Those were the orders?"

"Yes."

"I suppose Lane sent you here?"

"He left me here after the fight, to look out for you, and to tell you where he had gone."

"Oh!" said Will. "Then Lane saw us in the boat?"

"Certainly."

"Did he know Quantrell was with us?"

"We couldn't make out who the third man was, but we knew you had a prisoner. I started to come down on the shore and signal you, but just then the boat with the James Boys and Cole Younger came along, and I thought it better to wait."

"Lucky thing you did."

"Yes, I was able to see them hide the bags, but I got a terrible fright by almost stepping on those others who were asleep in there."

"What became of poor Braggs after I left?"

"Oh, I took him back to Pride's."

"I suppose that was the best place for him. How did you leave him?"

"Ever so much better. He'll come around all right."

"But is there no danger that old Bill Pride will betray him in spite of their relationship?"

"Never!"

"But he is such a rabid old secessionist."

Etta laughed.

"Why, he is nothing of the sort, but as good a Union man as you ever dared to be," she replied.

"Impossible! I've heard him rant and rave against the Union many a time."

"Oh, that was only done for a blind. He's one of Lane's spies, too, and has done good work by finding out the real secessionists; but I ought not to speak of these matters, and, of course, you will never repeat what I have said."

"Never! Now what are we to do? Remain here until those scoundrels have gone, or——"

"Hush! Hark!"

"I hear! They are coming back again!" breathed Captain Cole.

Etta instantly shut off the light.

"Remain motionless where you are, and upon no account speak a word," she whispered. "I'll be back in a moment. It will not be safe for us to move until we know their plans."

She stole away in the darkness.

So long was her absence that Will began to grow very uneasy.

"I can't stand this any longer, Cap," breathed Will at last. "Something has got to be done."

"Hush!" whispered the captain. "I think she is coming now."

"I am right here!" spoke Etta's voice close beside them. "If you want Quantrell, now is your time."

"Do you mean it?" whispered Will.

"Yes; he is there alone with Jim Cummins, the others having gone out for dry wood to build a fire. They have missed the bags and are furious. They are going to explore the cave."

"We'll take those two, anyhow!" cried Will. "I suppose you know some secret way out of here?"

"Yes, and more than one."

"I was sure of it. Lead on. Cap, you are with me, of course?"

"Most assuredly I am."

"Softly! Softly!" exclaimed Etta. "It must be done in a moment, if it is to be done at all. Now follow me."

It was not easy to follow her over the stones in the darkness without sounding an alarm, which would surely have proved fatal to them.

Still they managed to do it, and until the light of Etta's lantern was suddenly thrown full in the faces of the two guerrillas no suspicion came to their minds of the danger that was so near.

There stood Will and the captain covering them with cocked revolvers.

Etta held one also.

There were two aimed full at Quantrell's head.

"Gentlemen, throw up your hands, or you are dead men!" breathed Will, in his blandest tone.

A fierce imprecation burst from the guerrilla chief.

But he fully realized that to attempt resistance meant death.

Up went the hands—Jim Cummins' were up already.

"We'll keep them covered. Get their guns, Will, and tie them up!" breathed Etta. "Quick, quick!"

She had already provided Will with the cord to do the tying.

The young scout flew to his work.

In no time he had disarmed the precious pair and had them securely bound.

Not an instant too soon was this accomplished.

As Etta led the way over the stones, the James Boys and the Youngers could be heard coming into the cave.

"At last!" breathed Etta, as they gained their former place of concealment. "Now we are safe, but we mustn't stay here."

"Hadn't we better gag these fellows?" suggested the captain.

"For the love of heaven, don't put that cloth in my mouth again," pleaded Quantrell. "I swear I'll not make a sound."

But they would not trust him.

Handkerchiefs were thrust into the mouths of both prisoners.

Then Etta led the way further into the recesses of the cave.

Not a word was spoken.

Will was beginning to wonder if this strange journey would never end, when all at once they came out into a large chamber where four horses stood tied to a wooden bar placed up against the rocks.

"Just what I expected!" exclaimed Will. "Etta, is this another of your counterfeiters' dens?"

"Yes, it belonged to the same gang who built the place you know of," replied the girl. "I wish there was another horse, but Lane only gave me four."

"The prisoners can ride together."

They led their horses up the incline, Will guarding the prisoners.

Once on the prairie, Etta dropped the big trap door into place, and brushed the dry grass over it.

It was most ingeniously arranged.

In fact, the door was a regular box with grass growing upon it.

As it was left when they rode away, discovery seemed almost impossible.

Quantrell and Jim were tied together upon one horse.

On either side Will and the captain rode.

Etta led off, and as they started she turned in the saddle and pointed back toward the edge of the bluff.

"You see!" she exclaimed. "If they had horses we would have to fight for our freedom now."

There stood the guerrillas on the bluff looking at them.

Crack!

Crack!

Suddenly Jesse raised a rifle and sent two shots flying after them.

They fell far short of the little party.

"Now go!" laughed Will.

And he took off his hat and waved it as they dashed away.

No wonder the young scout felt triumphant.

He had every reason to feel more so later on.

For two hours later Will Harwood delivered Quantrell and the money into the hands of General Lane.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MOVE ON BRISTOL.

"Hooray! Hooray! There he comes!"

Frank James flung up his hat and began waving frantically at a solitary rider who could be seen in the distance dashing over the prairie toward the little knot of men.

Now, of this group Frank was one.

The Youngers were there, too.

Also six of the guerrillas who had fled after the battle on the bluff.

Among these were George Shepard and his brother Oll.

Unexpectedly the party from the cave had come upon them.

The fugitives still had their horses, and, what was better, they had three spare ones belonging to companions who had met their death.

But why had they halted here?"

Night was now falling, and the Red Legs were known to be uncomfortably near.

Jesse James came dashing into their midst.

Springing lightly from the saddle, he left the horse to crop the prairie grass, and joined the expectant group.

"Well, what did you learn, Jess?" demanded Frank, as the guerrillas crowded around.

"Why, it's just like this," said Jesse. "After it was decided that I should follow them, I put it right through over the prairie till I struck their trail."

"Had you any trouble finding it?"

"Not a bit. Of course we knew the direction they had taken."

"Well?"

"Well, I kept right on until I met an old shellback, who was making for Kirkman on a blind mule. From him I learned that the party had passed him and gone on to Bristol."

"And you went into the town?"

"Yes."

"Great Godfrey, that was a bold move!"

"Not so bold as you think for. What do you suppose the old fellow had loaded down his mule with?"

"Give it up."

"Frank, he had been robbing the dead up there on the bluff. He had a lot of army suits off of the Red Legs, and as many more from our boys."

"The old ghoul. Of course you shot him?"

"No, I didn't. I was out on business, and his was none of mine."

"What did you do?"

"Made him give me the best Yankee suit in the lot; I put it on, tied my own clothes up into a bundle, left them on the prairie, and rode boldly into the town."

"Just like you! Well, what did you learn?"

"Lots. Too much to tell here."

"Were you suspected?"

"Not at all. The Red Legs were running about everywhere, but no one even challenged me. Whether they took me for a new recruit or what, I don't know, but the only man who spoke to me, except them what I took up with, was a captain, who told that I had better report at the camp at nine o'clock, as they were going to move down to Kirkman at ten."

"That was important. I suppose they'll take Quantrell with them?"

"Oh, I found out more about it."

"How?"

"Got hold of a young fellow, and filled him full of rotten whisky. He told me all."

"Well?"

"They are going to take Quantrell to Kansas City. A train has been telegraphed for, and is expected to be at Kirkman by midnight."

"We must head that off, Jess."

"We must, Frank, and I'll tell you just how to do it."

"How?"

"I let the old ghoul, as you call him, go off on his blind mule, but I kept the clothes. We'll turn into Red Legs and never be suspected."

"Where did you leave the clothes, Jess?" asked Bob Younger.

"Not more than half a mile from here. I changed back to my own togs when I returned, for fear you fellows might take me for a Red Leg and put a ball into me, but it won't take us long to get into the blue if you're agreed."

"We're in your hands, Jess. Anything to rescue Quantrell," said Cole Younger.

And as the others were all of the same mind, the start was made at once.

Jesse led off across the prairie, Frank riding beside him.

Little more passed between the brothers until the place where Jesse had hidden the clothing was reached.

The army suits were found piled up among the grass just as he had left them.

They were bloodstained and dirty, telling a sad story of the fate of the poor fellows who had worn them.

There were enough of the suits to go around, and Quantrell's men were soon transformed into Red Legs, so far as outward appearance went.

Leaving their own clothes with the rest, they remounted and rode on.

An hour passed.

The sun had now sunk below the prairie, and darkness was creeping upon them.

As the last rays of light died away, Cole Younger rode up beside Jesse.

"Blamed if I see any sign of a town around here!" he remarked.

"You would be surprised if I told you we were within twenty minutes' ride of it."

"I wouldn't believe you."

"All the same, it's so."

"What do you mean, Jess?"

"Simply that Bristol lies at the bottom of a blame big sink, and you can't see it until you are close on to it—that's all."

"Oh, that's it, eh?"

"Yes. In less than ten minutes we shall be at the edge of the sink, and then you'll know."

Jesse's words were presently fulfilled.

In a short time the town suddenly burst into view, and then they began a gentle descent, which was to end at Bristol, some sixty feet below the general level of the prairie.

It was now quite dark, and lights were twinkling in the houses before them.

They rode into town by High Street.

There were but few persons on the street.

These eyed him curiously.

Not a Red Leg could be seen.

"What in thunder does all this mean?" Jesse anxiously remarked to Frank. "It can't be that they've gone!"

"Looks most confoundedly like it."

"I'll be whipped if it don't! We must know!"

They had reached Main Street by this time.

A man who came hurrying around the corner was hailed by Jesse, who, at the same time, gave the signal for a halt.

"Say, neighbor, where's General Lane's headquarters?" he demanded.

"Why, Lane has gone this hour and more," replied the man, looking at these rough riders with the same air of surprise that every one else who had seen them displayed.

"Gone?"

"Yes."

"Thunder, that's tough! We were ordered to join him here."

"Well, you are too late."

"Where has he gone?"

"To Kirkman."

"You don't say! What time did he start?"

"I told you about an hour ago."

"Have all hands gone with him?"

"Every mother's son of them, and it's a blamed outrage, too."

"What's an outrage?"

"Why, they ought to have left us a guard!"

"I agree with you. The country is full of wandering parties of guerrillas."

"That's just it, and here we are unprotected. They may swoop down on us at any moment, and rob our bank, same as they did over at Kirkman."

"Is there anything in your bank worth taking?"

"Anything in it! Why, there's twenty-five thousand dollars in it."

"No!"

"Oh, but there is."

"Well, it's a blame shame. Look here; they say they captured Quantrell—is that so?"

"Yes, it is."

"It is a big card for Lane."

"Oh, he didn't do it!"

"No? Who did?"

"A young scout named Harwood, and Etta Rivers, the girl spy."

"So? Probably that was the reason Lane was in such a hurry to light out. He wanted to get Quantrell to a safe place."

"Is that so? Say, speaking of money, how do you know there's twenty-five thousand dollars in the bank?"

"How do I know? Why, I'm the cashier—I ought to know."

"Surely you had. Where's your bank?"

"What do you want to know for?"

The cashier suddenly changed his tone.

His suspicion that all was not quite right with these men had been aroused.

"Why, I was only asking," said Jesse meekly.

"Find out!" replied the cashier gruffly, and he hurried away.

Jesse made no effort to stop him, but turned into Main Street.

"Say, you don't mean to tackle that bank, do you?" demanded Frank.

"I was thinking of it."

"Are we strong enough?"

"Why not? There are no Red Legs here."

"I'm with you, Jess. I think we can do it."

"Pass the word to the boys, and see what they say."

Every member of the little band expressed himself as highly in favor of the plan.

"Tell them to keep cool, Frank, and put themselves entirely in my hands," said Jesse.

And he led the way up Main Street.

They stopped at a hotel and had supper.

After supper they lounged around the piazza of the hotel for an hour or so.

People got used to seeing them, and forgot their presence.

During the evening they purchased another horse; and finally concluded they would attack the bank.

Bidding the hotel keeper good-by, they went to the barn, saddled their horses, and rode out on the street.

It was then midnight.

The bank was dark; they forced a window, broke into the safe, gathered all the money they could find, stowing it away in an old gripsack they found in a closet.

By the accidental discharge of Cole Younger's pistol they were discovered.

Jesse immediately ordered a retreat, but the people had been aroused.

Cries of "Thieves! Robbers! They've robbed the bank! Shoot them down!" was heard on all sides.

Soon the bullets came like hail from the guns which the people were armed with. The bandits returned the fire, checking their pursuers.

The bandits started to ride like the wind.

"Keep cool, boys! Let 'em have it!" cried Jesse as he wheeled his horse out into the middle of the street.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Then the firing began in earnest.

No one could stop them.

Away they dashed down Main Street.

But they were not followed.

At least six men dropped before that rain of bullets.

The crowd sent a few stray shots after them, but that was all.

With wild shouts of triumph, the guerrillas went dashing out of town.

"It looks so."

"Blamed if it don't, Jesse."

And thus remarking, Cole Younger wheeled about and dashed toward the knot of horsemen who were waiting at some little distance ahead.

Jesse had already started, and in a moment they joined their friends.

"See anything?" demanded Frank.

"No."

"They must have turned back."

"I don't think so."

"What, then?"

"Why, we have been riding in a half circle, and they have kept on straight."

The allusion was to a party of mounted men which had followed the guerrillas out of Bristol.

But the movement was entirely too long in coming to amount to anything.

Before they started in pursuit the James Boys and their followers were already half way up out of the big sink in which the town lay.

As Frank suggested, their course had been that of a semi-circle.

This accounted for the town still remaining visible, and also perhaps for their being no longer able to see their pursuers, but the darkness was probably largely responsible for that.

"Twas done slick enough, anyhow," said Frank.

"And what we want now is to make sure we don't lose the money same as we did the other."

"Of course. That's something we all know. What I want to get at is the road to Kirkman."

"Surely you ain't going into Kirkman?" said Cole.

"I am going to rescue Quantrell," replied Jesse emphatically.

"Well, if you'll allow me to say a word, going into Kirkman ain't the best way to do it."

"What's your idea, then?"

"You know what you told us about the train?"

"Of course."

"For us to rush into Kirkman would only be putting our heads into the lion's mouth."

"We tried it in Bristol, and came out all O. K."

"But the lion was not there. Besides, it was a necessity in the case of Bristol, but it's different now."

"You've got some scheme in your head, Cole, and the best way is to spit it out."

"I say let's go below Kirkman and lay for the train in which they are going to send Quantrell down to Kansas City. By doing that we stand a better chance of rescuing the colonel, and if we have any sort of luck we may capture Lane himself."

"Good!" exclaimed Jesse. "A bang-up idea."

"Couldn't be better," said Frank.

All being now arranged, an immediate start was made.

As usual, Jesse held the lead.

For more than two hours the horses went pounding over the prairie.

"Do you see that light over there?" asked Jesse.

"Yes."

"Well, it's the first we've seen since we lost sight of the lights of Bristol, and I believe it means the railroad."

"Very good. We'll act on your belief and make for the light."

They flew on.

As they neared the light others appeared.

Dark, shadowy forms began flitting before them.

They presently took the form of mounted men.

To the right and left they could be seen dashing.

Then suddenly they reined in and halted, waiting apparently for the guerrillas' approach.

But Jesse ordered a halt also.

"It's the Red Legs! They are throwing out a line!" he exclaimed.

Meanwhile, the other party remained watching them, but did not move.

"How many of them do you say there are, Frank?" asked Jesse?

"That's just what I was trying to make out."

"I don't believe there's more'n twenty."

"Nor do I."

"What in thunder ails them?"

"They don't act as though they wanted to fight very bad."

"I should say not. Hello! There's one of them coming forward."

A man suddenly rode out of the line.

Dashing around in a semi-circle, he gave a wild yell, at the same time discharging his revolver into the air.

A cheer went up from Jesse's party.

"It's our own crowd!" shouted George Shepard. "That's the signal me and Buck Budhorn agreed on before we separated."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CAPTURE OF LANE.

"Do you see them?"

"No, not now."

"They must have given up the chase."

In a moment the two parties had united, and there was a great handshaking all around.

After the first enthusiasm was over Jesse began questioning Buck Budhorn, who was a typical Piker, with long hair reaching far down over his shoulders, and legs so much more lengthy than usual that he towered above every man in the band.

"Where in thunder have you fellows been?" demanded Jesse.

"Oh, wandering around," replied Budhorn. "B'gosh, we got all broke to pieces after that fight, and have been trying to pull ourselves together ever since."

"How many are in your party, Buck?"

"Eighteen."

"Are there any other stragglers?"

"Not that I know of, but what in blazes are you fellers doing in the blue? We thought first off you was Red Legs for sure."

"Oh, that's a long story," said Jesse. "Look here, Buck, where's the railroad?"

"Right over there where you see those lights."

"Just what I thought. What town is it?"

"They call it Hardscrabble. Ha, ha, ha! It will be blamed hard scrabbling for them for the next month to come, I reckon."

"Hello! You've been there and cleaned out the place?"

"Well, rather! It's no use for you to think of it, Jess. Thar hain't even pickin's left."

"Good! We won't waste time scrabbling among the Hardscrabblers, then; but, look here, Buck, do you know anything about the country round about here?"

"Why, I know all about it. Many's the nigger I've strung up around here, and more black Republican Abolitionists than you could shake a stick at. Oh, yes, I know it blamed well."

"Just the man I want to talk to; where's Kirkman, east or west?"

"West, about nine miles."

"Where's the junction?"

"You mean where the road goes off to Elk Landing?"

"Yes."

"Why, that's east about three miles."

"What—do you mean to say that Hardscrabble is not on the branch?"

"That's what's the matter."

"Good enough! That simplifies matters!" cried Jesse.

And he hastened to communicate the welcome intelligence to Frank and Cole.

"All we've got to do is to lay for the train here," he said. "We better move right on down to Hardscrabble and see how the land lies."

The advance was ordered immediately.

Much to the consternation of the half a hundred inhabitants of the little village, there was a wild rush of armed men through their streets.

But the Hardscrabbleites took precious good care not to show themselves.

They had just enjoyed one dose of the guerrillas, and did not want another.

Even the station agent, who had returned to his post after Buck Budhorn's party left, fled precipitately at their approach.

Jesse made straight for the station and halted.

To the newcomers the situation had been fully explained, and they were prepared for what followed.

"It's Quantrell we want, boys!" cried Jesse, "and we are going to get him. Is there any one here who can run a telegraph machine?"

"I can. I used to be an operator in St. Louis," spoke up a young man who was one of Budhorn's gang.

"Then you're just the fellow we want," said Jesse. "Come with me."

He dismounted, and breaking open the door of the station proceeded to light the lamp which stood on the operating table.

The machine was clicking then, and seemed to be in good working order.

"What does it say?" demanded Jesse.

The young operator bent over the table and began to work the key.

"It's Kirkman calling," he replied presently.

"Oh, it is, eh? What do they want?"

"Want to know if anything more has been seen of the guerrillas."

"Oh, they'll do! Tell 'em no, they haven't been back since."

"I've already told them that."

"Good! Ask 'em if Lane is still at Kirkman."

The key went to clicking again.

"Yes, he is," answered the operator, after a moment.

Then the following conversation ensued, broken only by the clicks.

"Yes. They've got him in the hotel under a strong guard."

"Do they propose to take him through to Kansas City?"

"Yes, as soon as the train comes down from Atchison."

"What time do they expect to start?"

"They've had a dispatch from Atchison, and there's some trouble about getting the train off. They don't expect to leave Kirkman before six o'clock."

"Who goes with the prisoner?"

"Lane himself, and a guard of twenty men."

"Enough! Make sure that they think it's all right here."

"Have no fear of that," said the operator. "The man at the other end of the wire hasn't the slightest suspicion that I ain't all right."

The announcement thus received over the wire put matters on a definite basis.

"You had better dismount, boys, and get what sleep you can," said Jesse. "It's only a little after midnight, and we've got loads of time."

But there was no sleep for Jesse James that night.

He and Frank mounted guard in front of the station.

Buck Budhorn and three others were placed on the other side of the building toward the town.

As for the rest, they stretched themselves out upon the station floor and were soon fast asleep.

Slowly the hours dragged by.

Jesse and Frank, pacing up and down on the platform, watched anxiously for the first break of dawn.

At last it came, a faint streak along the eastern horizon.

Jesse looked in at the station clock.

It wanted still a quarter to six.

"Get up, there, young fellow! Get up!" he exclaimed, administering a sharp kick to the sleeping operator.

The young man opened his eyes and staggered to his feet.

"What's the row?" he demanded sleepily.

"Get to the telegraph machine there, and call up Kirkman."

"What for?"

"What for? Because I tell you to."

"Now, hold on, boss. I'm not standing out against you. I only want to know what to say."

"Ask 'em if the train is ready to start."

"I will if you say so, but I was thinking if it would be better to wait a bit."

"What for?"

"Won't they wonder what makes this little place feel so much interest in the movements of Lane? Wouldn't it be better to wait just a little, and call them up after the train has started?"

"By Godfrey, I think he's right," remarked Frank, who was looking in at the door.

"So be it; we'll wait twenty minutes," assented Jesse.

He watched the clock anxiously.

When the time had expired, the operator took his seat at the table, and gave the call for Kirkman.

"They've just left," he announced, after the machine had clicked a few moments.

"And was Quantrell aboard the train?"

"Yes."

"Good enough! We must get to work at once. Hello, there, boys! Hello! Wake up!"

But it took something more than calling to arouse the sleeping guerrillas.

At last they were all on their feet, and Jesse began hustling around.

"George Shepard, get half the horses and as many men over on the other side of the track behind that old barn!" he ordered.

"All right, Jess!"

"You'll appear in answer to two short whistles and guard the train on your side."

"O. K., Jess. Shall I do it now?"

"Right away. If the train makes any speed they ought to be here in twenty minutes. There's no time to be lost."

Shepard hurried away, and, with those he selected, began to saddle the horses.

Matters were now pretty well arranged.

But the one fear which haunted Jesse was that the train might not stop for the red flag.

He said as much to Frank.

"I shouldn't wonder a bit if you're right," replied Frank.

"We'd be in a hole then for fair."

"Well, rather."

"We must provide for that, Frank."

"But how?"

"I think I'll turn the switch," said Jesse, after thinking the matter over for a few moments.

He accordingly did it, and they settled themselves down to wait for the coming train.

On came the train. It was making great speed, considering that

the locomotive was one of those old-fashioned wood burners, long since out of use.

There were two passenger cars attached.

"Now! Now!" cried Frank. "Why do you wait so long?"

For the train was close upon them.

Not a whistle had sounded.

It was pretty evident that they meant to go by.

Jesse unfurled his red flag, and began waving.

Instantly the engineer looked out of the cab.

But he drew his head in again without delay.

Jesse saw his hand reach for the bell cord.

"They won't stop!" he called to Frank. "Look out for heads from the cars."

He had scarcely spoken when a window in the forward car was thrown up and a man's head was thrust out.

Jesse waved the flag wildly.

Down went the window.

But there was no whistle—no signs of slackening speed.

Jesse caught his breath and darted across the track.

"Into the station! Lively!" he cried. "They suspect, and mean to fire at us."

They were none too soon.

Scarcely had they gained cover when the train went whizzing by.

Every window was up now on the station side.

At each was a blue coat, with a rifle.

"We are dished!" gasped Cole. "By gosh, we'd better light out!"

"Rubbish!" cried Jesse. "We are good for 'em yet. Hold your breath, and hear 'em go!"

These words were still on his lips, when the locomotive took the switch.

Head on it dashed into the water tank.

Then there was a terrible crash.

"The job's done!" said Jesse. "Out with you, boys, all except Buck. We'll see what's coming next."

As he left the station he whispered something to Budhorn.

Over by the wrecked train all was dire confusion now.

Men were climbing out of the windows and helping others to get out.

From the rear car one only appeared.

It was General Jim Lane himself.

His sword was by his side, and his long beard waved in the wind as he rushed toward the station platform, revolver in hand.

"You scoundrels!" he shouted. "Who turned that switch?"

"Gosh blame it all, kurnil," drawled Jesse, "don't talk to us. We tried to warn you, but the engineer wouldn't stop nohow."

This gave Lane time to gain the platform.

"Jesse James!" he cried, catching a full view of the speaker.

"Hands up, Jim Lane!" hissed Jesse.

Instantly he covered him with his revolver.

So did Frank and Cole, while out of the station rushed Buck Budhorn, his tall form towering over all.

The Red Leg leader flung up his hands in a hurry.

At the same instant the giant Piker seized him by the collar and lifted him off his feet as though he had been a child.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BATTLE OF HARDCRABBLE.

"Quick! Away with him! Lose no time!"

Cool as an iceberg, although the capture of their leader was seen by the Red Legs, Jesse James gave the order.

Buck Budhorn understood his business.

To the big Piker Jesse had delegated the task of capturing Lane if the chance offered.

As it turned out, the Red Leg leader ran directly into their hands.

"Great gosh! Don't try it, Jess!" gasped Cole Younger, overpowered with the thought of what the capture of Lane might bring upon them.

"Shut up! I'm bossing this job!" hissed Jesse. "Away with you, Buck!"

Budhorn had already started.

In vain Lane struggled to free himself from the clutches of the giant.

Buck carried him around behind the station and tied him upon a horse, without paying the slightest attention to his struggles and threats.

Before he had taken ten steps Jesse whistled.

He gave both signals.

First it was for those under George Shepard's command who were stationed on the other side of the track behind the barn.

Out they came flying, and opened fire upon the Red Legs around the wrecked car.

Then Bob Younger got his signal.

Seeing Lane's peril, such of the soldiers as were free to act made a rush for the station.

But the sudden appearance of Bob's contingent threw them back in confusion.

"Fire! Sweep 'em down!" shouted Jesse.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

There was a general fusillade on both sides.

"Follow me up, boys!" cried Jesse.

He made a rush for the car which held the track.

Frank and Cole were close at his heels.

To what was going on outside they paid no attention.

"Quantrell's in there sure!" exclaimed Jesse as he leaped upon the platform. "That was the car Lane came out of, and in it he's got his man."

Kicking open the door, which was locked, they burst into the car without ceremony.

Crack!

Instantly a shot came whizzing toward them.

Crack!

Then another.

The first grazed Jesse's hat.

The second narrowly missed Frank's head.

Pale as death, but perfectly cool, there stood Will Harwood firing.

Quantrell, securely bound, sat on one side of the aisle, and Jim Cummins in the same plight on the other.

There was no one else in the car.

There was something in the very boldness of the act which prevented Jesse from returning the shots.

"Enough!" he cried. "Raise that revolver once more, and I'll have no mercy on you! Throw up your hands!"

"Kill him, Jess! Kill him!" roared Jim Cummins.

"No, no! Spare his life!" cried Quantrell; "but hold him tight, boys! Upon no account allow him to escape!"

For Will was already a prisoner.

"Thank God, you have come! I knew you wouldn't desert me!" gasped Quantrell, as Jesse set him free.

"Desert you, Colonel. Did you dream of such a thing?"

"No, no! Jim, is it all right with you?"

"Frank has fixed me!" cried Jim Cummins, springing to his feet.

"Good! Where's Lane, Jesse?"

"Captured."

"Fine!"

"Not another word now," broke in Jesse. "Colonel, we are needed outside. Let us lose no time! Cole, look after that boy."

Away they flew through the car.

Outside the battle was raging furiously.

The Red Legs were no cowards.

They had made a bold stand, instead of breaking into a panic at the loss of their leader, as many would have done.

But the end came just as they stepped from the car.

Attacked from both sides, the Red Legs lost courage.

They broke the line hastily formed, and fled in every direction.

Some made a break for the town.

Others ran out upon the prairie.

Quantrell now assumed full command.

"Fall in!" he cried.

The horses were brought up into line in a hurry.

"Jesse James, see if all the living are out of the wreck."

Jesse dismounted, and examined the car.

"They are all out, Colonel."

"Any dead in there?"

"No."

"The engineer and fireman?"

"They are both dead, and lying over there near the wreck."

"Enough! Hold yourself in readiness for my orders."

Thus saying, Quantrell moved over to the Red Leg leader.

Lane sat upon a white mare with Buck Budhorn alongside of him upon a roan.

He was securely bound, and looked the picture of despair.

Upon another horse alongside Will Harwood sat.

These were the only prisoners.

The only wonder is he did not order the Red Leg wounded shot where they lay.

But this, for some explained reason, he did not do.

"Well, Jim Lane, we meet again, and under slightly different circumstances, it seems," he said, sneeringly.

"So it seems," growled Lane.

"You see I am a man not without friends."

"I see."

"I ought to kill you where you sit, and rid the country of such a paltry coward. Perhaps I may conclude to do so. It all depends upon yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know well enough what I mean. I want a little information from you, my bold Red Leg, and you must know just what it is."

"I don't know nothing about it. I am no mind reader."

"Then I will explain. When I was captured there was certain bags of money captured with me. What has become of them? Speak!"

"I'll never tell you."

"Oh, but you will—you must."

"I won't."

"It's blame easy to make him tell, colonel," suggested Jesse.

"Hold on," said Quantrell. "We'll tackle this boy first."

He scowled upon Will, blackly.

"Young man, you got the best of me there in the cave," he said, "but in spite of that I admire you, blamed if I don't."

"Thank you for nothing," replied Will, coolly.

"I admire bravery wherever I meet it, and you are brave."

"Don't flatter me. It will do you no good."

"Where are those bags?"

"Don't know."

"You know what was done with them, and you will have to tell."

"I admit that I know, but I will never tell."

"Ha! Do you defy me?"

"I do in that."

"I am a bad man when aroused. Ask these boys here. They will tell you to beware of stirring me up."

"It would make no difference what they told me. I would never tell you what was done with the money."

"We'll see. I could make you tell. But, as I said before, I admire your bravery; for that reason I shall spare you, if it is possible, and put the screws to my old friend, Jim Lane."

Lane turned ghastly pale.

And well he might, for the look Quantrell gave him was one of horrible malignity.

They gathered a pile of hay, and took General Lane off his horse.

Jesse stood ready with a match to light the hay.

"Light the fire and toss him in!" shouted Quantrell.

"No, no! I'll tell the truth. The money comes down by train."

"Is he lying, or is he straight?" asked Quantrell, appealing to Will.

"It is true," replied Will, resolved to bring all this to an end.

"Why was it arranged so?"

"General Lane would have nothing to do with the transportation of the money."

"Who's doing it?"

"The sheriff."

"When does the train start?"

"It was to leave when they got word from us that the road was clear."

"So, so! And to run through to Kansas City?"

"Yes."

"Will that come with the rest?"

"No."

"What has been done with it?"

"I left it in charge of the Kirkman bank people. I could do no more."

"Enough! You have saved Lane's life for the present. Later on we will see."

"Send a telegram to Kirkman telling them that everything is all clear, and they had better come on."

"Can it be done?"

"Certainly. We have a fellow here who telegraphed before. That's the way I knew you were on this train."

"All right. Attend to it, Jesse."

But Jesse found that he could not attend to it, as he had supposed.

He ran his eye over the men for the young telegraph operator.

"Where's Cnd Windlip?" he exclaimed.

"Wall, I reckon you'll find him lyin' dead down thar by the bullgine, Jesse," drawled one of the men.

"Heavens! You don't mean it!"

"Yes."

"Strange I didn't see him."

"He's thar, though, Jess," said the man. "He was one of the first to fall."

This put a sudden end to Jesse's plan.

"Isn't there any one here who can work the machine?" demanded Quantrell.

No one answered.

"Look up the station agent," suggested Cole.

"No, no!" said Quantrell. "That would take all day and like enough we wouldn't find him."

He turned to Will.

"You are sure the train won't start until they get word?" he asked.

"That was the understanding."

"Is it so, Jim Lane?"

"Yes, yes!" growled Lane. "The boy speaks the truth."

"There's only one thing to do, then," said Quantrell, "and we'll do it now. Jess, Frank, Cole! You three take that boy and ride to Brownsburg, the next station up the road, and telegraph from there that the way is clear."

"Shall we hold him a prisoner as he is?" demanded Jesse.

"No. Release him, but shoot him dead if he attempts to escape."

Five minutes later Will Harwood, freed from his bonds, rode out of Hardscrabble, accompanied by Cole Younger, Jesse and Frank James.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

"We must be almost there."

"I should say so."

"We've covered at least five miles, and Budhorn said 'twasn't more'n six to Brownsburg."

"In my opinion we'll see the town in a minute, Jess," replied Frank, peering ahead.

"Wish to goodness we might, for I want to see the end of this business. What do you know about it, young fellow?"

Jesse turned to Will, speaking to him now for the first time since they left Hardscrabble.

"Nothing at all," replied Will.

"I don't see what the deuce Quantrell sent you with us for," growled Cole, "but I suppose he must have had some reason."

"Don't you know the reason?" asked Jesse.

"No."

"The despatch is to be sent in his name. We are to do the Red Leg act again, and make everything look straight."

"Oh, I see. Blame me, if I hadn't almost forgotten that we wore the blue."

A few moments later, and they came in sight of Brownsburg.

It was even a smaller place than Hardscrabble, and very much scattered.

They rode directly to the station and dismounted.

A young man but little older than Will came hurrying out to meet them.

"Hello, Will Harwood! What in thunder are you doing here?" he exclaimed. "Haven't seen you in a dog's age. Have you joined the Red Legs, or what?"

Will stared helplessly at the speaker.

At first he could not imagine that he had ever seen him before.

Then all at once it dawned upon him that he was being addressed by Etta Rivers in disguise.

It almost took his breath away, but he returned the girl's greeting as though they had been life-long friends.

"So you're acquainted?" growled Jesse, suspiciously.

"Oh, yes."

"Introduce me."

"Mr. Smith, this is my friend Mr. James," said Will.

"Yes," broke in Jesse, "we've been sent up here by General Lane from Hardscrabble to telegraph Kirkman that the way is all clear for the other train. Attend to it, please."

"That's more than I can do, Mr. James," replied the disguised girl, whose identity Jesse never seemed to suspect.

"What's the matter? Can't you work the machine?"

"No, I'm not the agent."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"Thunder and Mars! We've got to find him!" roared Jesse.

"Wait a minute. I can fix it."

"What do you mean?"

"There is no need of telegraphing."

"I don't understand you."

"The agent was here just a minute ago. He just received word that the train had started from Kirkman."

"Started."

"Yes."

"When?"

"About fifteen minutes ago."

"Blue blazes! Then she's almost due here."

"Wouldn't wonder."

Here was an unexpected turn of affairs.

"You can chin with your friend a moment, Harwood," said Jesse, suddenly.

He motioned to Frank and Cole to fall back.

While these three worthies conversed in whispers, Will embraced the opportunity to have a private word with Etta.

"What in the world are you doing here?" he whispered.

"I'm on private business for Lane. Have you turned guerilla, or—"

"No, no! Etta, disaster has come to us. Lane is captured. I am a prisoner, all is known about the money coming down on the train, and a big force of guerillas is waiting at Hardscrabble."

"I know all that, Will."

"You do?"

"Yes. The agent got a telegram from Martinville, below Hardscrabble, telling him what had happened. He has gone up in the town to warn the people for fear the guerillas should come this way."

"What is to be done? Is there no way of warning those upon the train?"

"No way and no need."

"No need! I tell you there is! The other train is a wreck at Hardscrabble, and this one will meet with the same fate."

"I think not."

"As mysterious as ever, but here they come."

Their conversation was suddenly broken in upon the return of the James Boys.

Will read the determination in Jesse's eyes.

"Well, have you chinned enough?" he asked carelessly.

"We have been talking over our old times," replied Will.

"So? Well, suppose you do a little job for me?"

"What is it?"

"Step down there and turn that switch."

"What?"

"Turn the switch, I say."

"But it will throw the train against that big bumper on the siding."

"Will it? That's just what I want. You turn it, or—"

Out came the everlasting revolver aimed at Will's head.

Still the boy would have refused, for to endanger the lives of those on the train seemed to him a dastardly act.

But Etta gave him a sly wink which seemed to say "obey."

He accordingly hurried over to the switch and turned it.

"That's right," said Jesse. "Now, then, young fellow, what do you suppose we are going to do?"

This was addressed to Etta.

"I should say that you meant to wreck the train," the disguised girl carelessly replied.

"That's the talk. You don't seem to worry much."

"It's none of my business, but the station agent may have something to say about it. I suppose you know he is back again?"

"What!"

He is inside now, working the wire.

"Thunder and guns! Why didn't you say so?" replied Jesse.

The telegraph instrument was clicking, and he believed her.

Followed by Frank and Cole, he rushed into the station.

Quick as a flash, Etta shut the door and secured it behind them, for the key was in the lock.

"Will! Will!" she cried. "We've got them now! The train is coming, and there are at least a hundred of Lane's men aboard! Throw the switch back!"

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Furiously the guerillas were beating upon the door.

"Let us out! Let us out, gosh blame it all, or we will be the death of you!" Jesse roared.

At the same instant the whistle of the approaching train was heard, and the headlight loomed up in the distance like some huge star.

"What have you done?" gasped Will, throwing the switch and rushing upon the platform. "They'll murder us now, as sure as fate."

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

The hammering and shouting kept right up.

"Not much! They can't get out!"

"But the agent—they'll kill him!"

"Oh, bother! Do you think he is in there? I only fooled

them. Keep cool. We'll save the train and rescue Jim Lane in the bargain. Keep your eye on the door."

Thus saying, Etta ran forward, and seizing a red lantern which hung against the station, began to wave.

It was only the door which needed watching.

There was but one window to the station, and this was secured by a heavy shutter which, owing to the breaking of the glass a few days before, had been nailed fast.

"Open the door! Open the door, or by heaven, your lives ain't worth a rush!" roared Jesse.

Will made no answer.

"If they break out it's all day with us!" he thought, for he had nothing to defend himself with.

Meanwhile the train whistled again.

"They are slowing down!" cried Etta. "We are all safe now!"

"Thank heaven, they are at work on the window! They'll have the shutter open in a minute."

"All right! Don't be scared! At last!"

For the train had come to a stop in front of the station.

Through the windows of the three cars armed bluecoats could be seen.

"What's the matter here?" called the engineer.

"Lots!" replied Etta. "Is Captain Grey inside?"

"Here I am!" cried a man, wearing a captain's uniform, who came hurrying out of the forward car.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" cried Captain Grey, jumping off. "Have you found out what you were sent for?"

"Not yet, but I have struck something else," replied Etta, coolly. "Captain, three of Quantrell's men are inside there, disguised as Union soldiers. Lane is a prisoner at Hardscrabble, and in Quantrell's hands, and the guerillas are waiting for you."

Of course, this announcement caused great excitement.

In a moment the whole story was told, and the Red Legs were ordered out of the cars.

Jesse, Frank and Cole came sneaking out when the door was opened, looking very much disgusted.

But even then, Jesse tried to put on a bold front.

"Whoever says we are guerillas, lies!" he growled. "Those two fellows are rebel spies. We belong to Lane's command, and —"

"Silence!" said Captain Grey, sternly. "Men, take those three men into the rear car and guard them well!"

They were hustled off without ceremony.

"You will go on, of course, and rescue Lane?" asked Etta.

"Most assuredly," replied the captain. "And you?"

"I shall remain here until I have finished my work, but this young man will go with you."

"Why, it's Mr. Harwood, who helped you before!" said the captain.

Until now he had not recognized Will.

A few minutes later, and the train started, leaving Etta alone on the station platform.

"Success to you, Will!" she called. "We shall meet again."

"A brave girl that," said Captain Grey, as they took their seats in the last car near the prisoners.

"She is, indeed," replied Will. "Only for her this train would be a wreck now, and half of your men dead or wounded. But look here, captain, hadn't you better tie those scoundrels? They are desperate men."

"No, I don't think it necessary," was the reply. "What can they do? We have disarmed them. I hardly think they will care to try any games with us."

"Not quite disarmed, Frank," whispered Jesse, who had overheard this remark.

"Same here!" breathed Frank.

"What have you got?"

"Revolver in my boot."

"Bully! So have I! Pass the word to Cole."

"Humph! I'm there, too," whispered Cole, when Frank spoke.

"Wait until they stop, and we'll make a dash for the rear door!" breathed Jesse. "If we can't help Quantrell, we can at least save ourselves!"

"Silence there, prisoners!" called Captain Grey.

The guerillas sullenly obeyed.

On flew the train.

Captain Grey had given his orders to the engineer to slow down as they neared Hardscrabble, whether a signal was given or not.

"How near are we to Hardscrabble now?"

"About two miles."

"What's that light?"

"That's the station."

"Good! Keep your eye peeled."

Another mile was covered.

"There's the red light!" exclaimed Will.

All saw it, and the engineer prepared to stop.

"Be ready, boys, when I give the word."

As the train began slowing down Lieutenant Sanders sprang to his feet.

"Six of you guard the prisoners!" he ordered. "The rest follow me when I give the word."

Six against three!

It requires downright courage to stand up against such odds.

But the James Boys and Cole Younger were possessed of just such courage.

Suddenly the train stopped.

Outside loud voices could be heard shouting.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Three shots were fired instantly, followed by others.

All but the guard left the train now.

"Down with the guerillas!" voices shouted.

Then suddenly the old Missouri yell rang out.

Above the sound rose Quantrell's stentorian voice:

"Charge!

"Fire!

"Sweep 'em off the earth!"

The time had come!

The sound of his leader's voice aroused Jesse James to action.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet.

Frank and Cole were not a second behind him in the move.

"Sit down, there!" shouted one of the guards threateningly.

He had spoken his last words.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

To the amazement of the guard, up went three revolvers.

Three shots went flying through the car.

Three men dropped as the guerillas made a rush for the door.

Of course, the fire was returned by those remaining.

But it was too late!

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Jesse, Frank and Cole each fired a parting shot.

Two more fell wounded, and the guerillas leaped from the train.

Too late to be of any service to Quantrell, however.

The Red Legs had charged upon the guerillas, taking them entirely by surprise, for Quantrell actually believed he was going to capture the train.

Before Jesse and the other could join him, the battle was almost lost to the guerilla chief.

Ten of his men had fallen.

Quantrell himself was wounded in the arm, but managed to hold the saddle.

"Rally! Rally! The money is on board here, colonel!" shouted Jesse.

He sprang upon a riderless horse, Frank and Cole doing the same.

"Too late, boys! Too late!" groaned Quantrell.

As he recognized them he gave a signal for the retreat.

"Guard Lane, Jess!" he shouted, as they dashed away. "We'll hold him, anyway, if——"

Crack!

It was but one shot among many.

But that shot, fired by Bill Harwood, undoubtedly saved General Lane.

For Will aimed for the horse upon which the Red Leg leader sat tied.

The animal reared, and with a terrible groan fell over upon his side.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Amid a rain of bullets the guerillas dashed away.

Will rushed for his commander, who had, fortunately, fallen clear of the dying horse.

"It was you who did it!" cried General Lane, as Will cut the cords which held his arms to his sides, and assisted him to his feet. "It was you, Will Harwood! I saw you fire! You saved my life!"

It was so.

Will Harwood found himself quite a hero that night.

General Lane shook his hand warmly, and shook it again, when Captain Grey told the part that Will had played.

Of course, it was impossible to follow up their victory unprovided, as they were, with horses.

Lane immediately assumed command.

The wounded on both sides were put into the cars and the train started.

In due time they reached Kansas City, and the money was turned over to the care of the Commercial Bank, to be forwarded to St. Louis later on.

Again Will found himself coming in for a great deal of praise, for General Lane took good care that the officers of the bank were informed of the brave part he had played.

Quantrell and the James Boys crossed the river in the early morning.

Thus ended the great Kansas raid.

The next thing that was heard of the guerillas was an attack made upon a Union force in the far south of Missouri, near the Arkansas line.

Upon the urgent solicitation of General Lane, Will Harwood joined the Union army and performed valuable work as a scout, much of which was done in connection with Etta Rivers, the famous girl spy.

Indeed, so persistently were these two found working together that none of their friends were surprised when they heard of their marriage, shortly before the close of the war.

In later years Will Harwood became one of the most trusted detectives in the United States Secret Service, which occupation he followed for many years, earning both money and fame.

Thus, by the accident of his accompanying Mr. Pierce from Kickapoo on that fatal night, was Will Harwood's lifework fixed.

He often remarked in later years that he might have gone through life as a country storekeeper but for THE JAMES BOYS AND THE RED LEGS.

THE END.

Read "The James Boys and the Railroad King; or, Held for Ransom by Train Robbers," which will be the next number (125) of "The James Boys Weekly."

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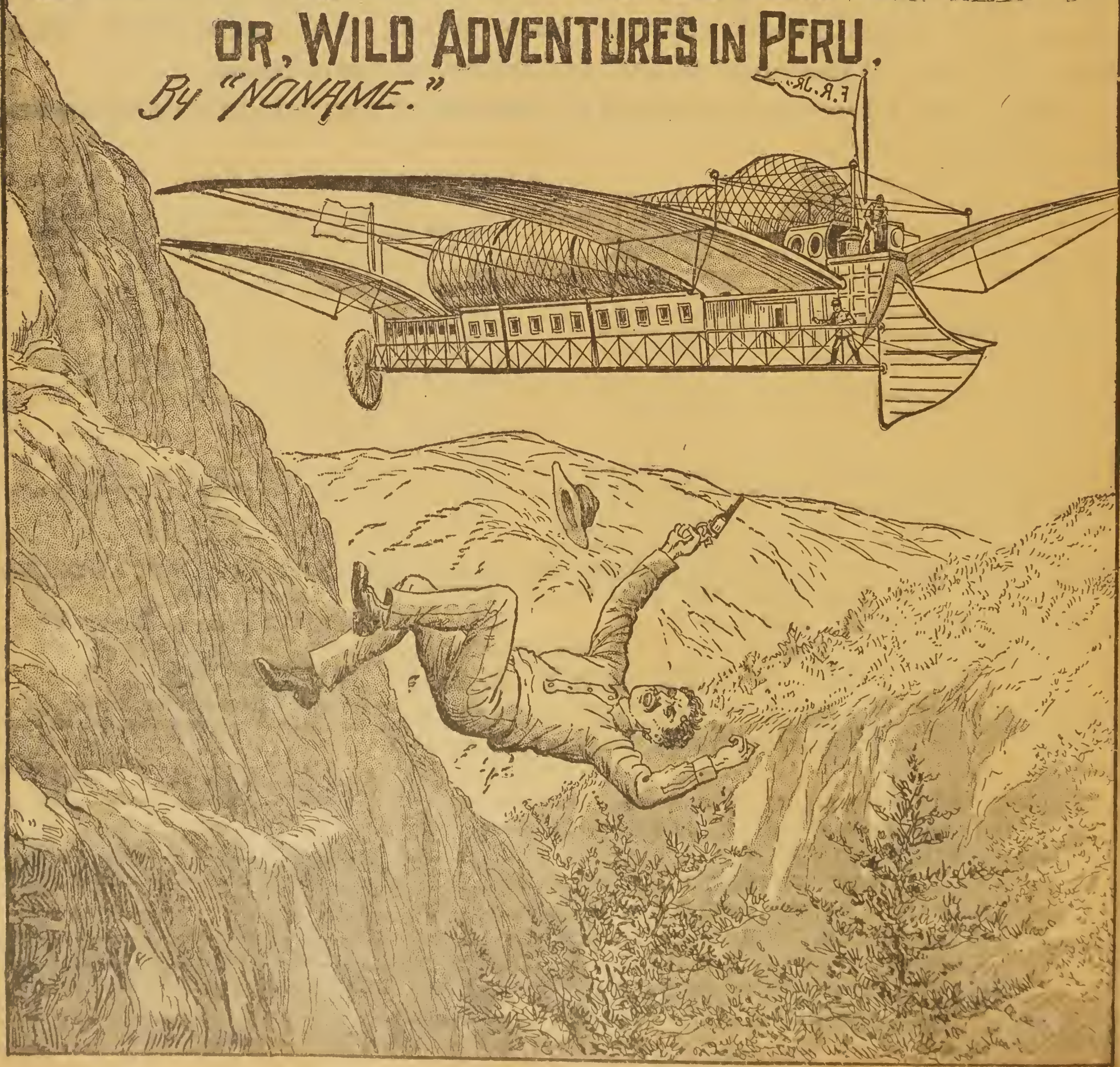
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